



*A Cheyenne*  
**CELEBRATION**

*Caroline Lee*  
Bestselling Author



The  
Sweet  
Cheyenne  
Quartet  
Book 2



A desperate  
debutante  
declares her  
independence  
from the  
expected.





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# A Cheyenne Celebration

*Caroline Lee* 

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*For all of us Mollys  
who can't help but roll our eyes  
at pristinely perfect  
romance heroines.*

## CHAPTER ONE



June, 1881

The week after she turned twenty, Cameron MacLeod came courting. Serena wasn't that surprised when Brixley poked his head into the office—her father's office—to tell her that he'd put Mr. MacLeod in the parlor. No, Serena had expected the rancher days ago. She was impressed he'd managed to wait a full week.

She thanked Brixley with a smile, and closed the account ledger in front of her. An ache had started behind her eyes, and she rubbed her temples in a futile attempt to rid herself of it. It wasn't even noon, but she'd already spent hours poring over her father's scratchy handwriting, attempting to make sense of the year ahead. Her shoulders were sore from the tension of trying to make the numbers match up.

Numbers! Who would have thought that ranching involved so many numbers? It was just silly. Her father had always seemed to effortlessly balance the books; making sure that their spread had the proper feed and manpower, and knowing exactly how many head of cattle they could afford to send to slaughter any particular year. But since his death almost two years ago, Serena had been stumbling through his equations, *hoping* that nothing much would change, and that the ranch would continue to operate smoothly.

Unfortunately, it wasn't, and she could no longer ignore that fact. She'd lost several hands who had refused to work for a woman, and because she was so unprepared, the ranch had lost cattle to both of the past winters. And no matter how many times she did the math, the current numbers didn't add up correctly either. Serena had a strong suspicion her beef was being rustled. But she pinched the bridge of her nose and admitted to herself that it *could* just be because she was so terrible with numbers. Honest to Heaven, she had no idea what she was doing, or how she was supposed to keep her father's ranch from going under.

The groan that escaped her lips when she stood and stretched wasn't entirely from the ache in her back. She was honest enough with

herself to admit the truth; she was never going to make the Double-S a success. It wasn't just that she hated the numbers, hated having to balance everything so properly. That would be fine if she truly loved the ranch; she could learn how to do those things.

But she hated the Double-S; hated almost everything about it. The dirt and the coarseness and the numbers and the memories. She hated the thought of spending the rest of her life trapped here on this patch of *nothingness*, when there was a perfectly good city not two hours' ride away. She hated having to sacrifice to keep *her father's* dream alive, when she hadn't particularly cared for the man in the first place.

She sighed, and mentally *tsked* herself, straightening her shoulders. She didn't *hate* the Double-S, not truly. There were some nice parts to it, like the sunsets and the poppies. The years she'd spent here hadn't been horrible; just lonely. She'd been desperate for affection after her mother passed away, and her father was a distant, intimidating presence in her life. But when their neighbor Mr. Barker married, and his new sisters-in-law came to live with him, Serena would often spend hours at his house, reading Wendy's books and talking about fashion. Wendy had been one of the bright spots of Serena's life on the Double-S, but she'd moved to St. Louis a year ago for school. Serena missed being able to talk things over with her best friend. *Wendy* probably wouldn't have any trouble with all of these numbers.

Voices from the parlor interrupted her maudlin musing. Oh yes, Mr. MacLeod. Her hands fluttered about her bun, tucking in stray strands and pinching her cheeks for color. She smoothed down the front of her dress, brushing off the few crumbs left by Brixley's breakfast muffin.

Her smile was a little forced when she slipped through the foyer into the parlor, and noticed the dining room door swinging shut. Thank goodness, Brixley had covered her bad manners of making her guest wait by offering him refreshments. There was a tall glass of lemonade on the table beside Mr. MacLeod, and a cup of tea beside her Aunt Agnes—at least, Serena thought it was Agnes, rather than her identical twin Agatha—who was dozing in her favorite chair in the corner. Caesar was curled up on her lap, but opened one orange eye to glare at her haughtily for interrupting his nap. Mr. MacLeod was eying the older woman nervously, as if not sure if he should attempt polite conversation.

But he stood when he noticed Serena enter the room, and she caught her breath to see him, as she did every time. My goodness, but he was striking. Handsome even, in a course, cowboy sort of way. His hair was golden-brown, and he wore it long, in waves that brushed his collar at times, and his shoulders at others. His eyes were the green of a Wyoming spring, under harshly slanted brows. He'd shaved for this



visit—maybe he knew that she hated beards—and his square jaw was clenched. But his most remarkable feature was his height; she barely came up to his chest, and felt tiny next to him. But he had always been very gentle with her, and had never given her any reason to think that he'd be as intimidating as her father had been. Still, she couldn't help but feel a certain wariness.

"Happy birthday, Miss Selkirk." Mr. MacLeod kept his voice quiet, but thrust a bouquet at her, and she blinked in surprise. Clutched in one dark fist was a collection of her favorite yellow poppies, black-eyed-susans, and delicate little cinquefoils. They were lovely together, and so carefully arrayed that she couldn't help but be charmed. Here was a man who carried a Winchester and wrangled cattle and rode fence in the worst blizzard, stopping to arrange wildflowers for his neighbor. She couldn't imagine her father ever doing anything so sweet.

And so this time, her smile was genuine when she took the bouquet from him. "Thank you very much, Mr. MacLeod. That's very kind of you." If she hadn't been watching him from the corner of her eye while she arranged the flowers in one of her mother's vases, she might have missed the slight flush that crept up the collar of his new shirt. Was he wearing a new shirt just for her?

It was a little endearing to think that he might be uncomfortable in her presence—even though she knew why he was here—so she set out to relax him. "You didn't need to bring me flowers, Mr. MacLeod, but I'm so very pleased that you did. You probably didn't know this, but I adore the poppies that grow wild on our properties."

He smiled crookedly, and suddenly the room felt warm. Striking? No, Cameron MacLeod could be downright handsome, especially with that humble little smile. "I remember, Miss Selkirk. You mentioned it at Easter a few years ago. And please, call me Cam."

Serena took a deep breath. Here it came. Of course a man bent on courting would insist on her using his given name. "Very well, Cam."

"And I hope, in return, I might call you Serena."

Her smile hitched, and suddenly she couldn't think of anything coy or polite to say. Her gaze darted to dear Agnes, softly snoring the light streaming through the front window, looking as contented as the cat on her lap. Serena wasn't completely convinced that the older woman was asleep; leave it to one of her aunts to enact an elaborate charade, just to spy on her. Still, sleeping or not, it would have been nice if her aunt had given her *some* kind of sign about the propriety of Mr. MacL—*Cam's* request. "That seems... improper." She inwardly winced at her awkwardness.

"Miss Selkirk.... Serena." Despite holding her own breath in horrified anticipation, she couldn't help but notice the way the cotton

of his shirt stretched across his shoulders as he took a deep breath. “As you know, we’ve been neighbors for many years, and our ranches border one another along several miles. Your father was a canny businessman, and grew the Double-S into a successful cattle ranch. He was a respected member of the Laramie County Stock Association... And I am too. I can’t yet match your nine hundred head of cattle, but I’m getting there. My Open Skye is a desirable piece of property itself.”

It was actually sweet the way he was getting so nervous, extolling his assets. She knew that Mr. MacLe—*Cam* wasn’t a boastful man, but he’d have to make sure that she knew his worth, if he expected to ask for her hand. Who would have ever thought that such a large, overwhelming man could be nervous over a little something like courting a woman? She tried not to smile as her mind wandered.

Oh, she knew very well how much the Open Skye was worth, and had spent some time thinking hard about it over the last several months. Cam had bought up the land west of the Double-S when she was eleven, and had been frantically expanding for the last nine years. Despite his father’s grouchiness, Serena had seen the MacLeods every few months at social functions, and hadn’t been blind to Cam’s approving glances as she’d grown older. The Double-S sat on a deep bend of Horse Creek, a more reliable water source than the Open Skye had access to. Oh, Cam’s cattle wouldn’t parch, since her father had never fenced out MacLeod beef, but she knew that he wanted access to her bend. He probably wouldn’t mind access to her cattle, as well; as he’d said, the Double-S had even more animals than he did. And, if Serena were honest with herself—she didn’t think she was being boastful, if she only admitted it to herself—Cam probably wanted access to her, too.

Marriageable young women were rare in the Wyoming Territory, and even rarer outside of Cheyenne. If a man wanted a bride, he’d have to take who he could find, but Serena thought that she was pretty enough. Her aunts always told her so, anyway, and she wasn’t blind to the admiring looks men seemed to send her way. Her features were plain, but her skin was clear. Everyone seemed to place so much worth on porcelain skin—which she seemed to be blessed with—but so few women actually bothered to protect themselves from the ravages of the sun. Serena made a point of always wearing bonnets and gloves, and prided herself on the fact that nary a freckle appeared on the bridge of her nose, even in the heat of summer. Her clear, smooth skin matched her hair; hair so blonde it was nearly silver. It was straight as a board, and easy enough to pull back into a bun, but nearly impossible to do anything else with, other than have it lay flat against her back. She often despaired of ever being able to wear any

of the fashionable coiffures the ladies in Cheyenne wore.

But she had to admit that Cam probably wasn't courting her for her hair—styled or no—or even her skin. He'd known her for years, had watched her grow older. "Grow older", rather than "grow up", because it seemed to Serena that she'd stopped growing around fourteen; she was smaller than almost anyone she knew, besides little Annie. It was a point of irritation with Serena, since it caused people to take her less seriously. But Cam had been her neighbor for years, and it probably wouldn't have mattered if she were thirty and buck-toothed; he'd still want to court her. He wanted the Double-S.

The ranch had been in limbo for the last two years, since Stanley Selkirk's death. Serena had come back to live here almost full-time, to manage it, despite her utter unsuitability to the task. But upon her twentieth birthday last week, the Double-S Ranch and all of its profits became legally hers to dispose of as she saw fit. And Cameron MacLeod was obviously hoping that meant marriage; she could marry him and combine their ranches. He would have reliable access to water, and double the size of his property.

And she? What would she get? Well, she'd get a man to handle all of this ridiculous ranch business. All of these stupid numbers. And not just any man; Cam MacLeod was a handsome man who made her breath hitch when he smiled, who was already established and a proven businessman. A woman could look long and hard and not find a better candidate for a husband.

Which is why Serena was able to let her mind wander through most of what he was saying now; she'd been thinking about it—about *him*—for months. Yes, Cameron MacLeod was prime husband material, with only one teensy problem.

She didn't *want* to marry him. She didn't *want* to be stuck out here on the Double-S—or even the Open Skye—for the rest of her life. She didn't *want* a husband who was almost two feet taller than her and strong enough to crush her with one hand. It didn't matter if he'd always been gentle with her; she couldn't help but find his size daunting.

But what other option did she have? She had no skills, no way to support herself. She and her aunts had become used to living on the ranch's proceeds. Why, they could barely cook for themselves, and she couldn't imagine them cleaning a house. Thank goodness for Brixley! ...whose wage was paid from the profits the Double-S brought in each year.

She sighed. Like it or not, she was stuck with the ranch until she could come up with a better way to support herself and her aunts.

Cam must have misinterpreted that sigh, because he sat up even straighter, if it was possible. "And I know that my father isn't the

easiest to get along with—" the understatement of the year! "—but I'm sure that he can be polite enough to welcome my wife to my home. You are..." Cam cleared his throat. "You are the most perfect woman in Laramie County. Probably the entire Territory! I would be honored if..." he cleared his throat again, and she had to repress a smile, focusing on appearing merely mildly interested. "If you would consent to my courting you." He glanced at Agnes, still doing her napping act. "I know that your aunts aren't your guardians anymore, but I'll ask them too, when Miss... Agnes...? wakes up."

Serena couldn't contain her smile, but she hoped it looked pleased, rather than teasing, which is how she felt. She'd heard that Cam MacLeod had once wrestled a bull determined to gore one of his cowhands, and here the man was blushing and stammering over asking to court her. It was positively silly, to think that he might be nervous about something so small.

But despite the flattering implications, Serena couldn't make herself agree to his suit whole-heartedly. She liked Cam, yes, and even found him attractive. He would make a wonderful husband; honest, true and devoted. But a wonderful husband to *her*? She still wasn't sure. She'd spent twenty years hating being a rancher's daughter. Did she want to spend the rest of her life as a rancher's wife?

And so she told him the truth, or as much of the truth as she thought he needed to hear. "I am truly flattered, Cam. You've been our neighbor for years, and we've always considered you—and your father—" God forgive her for that little white lie "—to be dear friends. We haven't seen you nearly often enough, and I would welcome your company a bit more often."

She smiled sweetly at him, and his return grin was practically blinding... and made her breath short again. She hadn't exactly given him permission to court her, but hadn't turned him down either. Apparently, that was good enough. And my, was it getting warmer in here?

She stood up abruptly, and crossed to the window, loosening the curtains to block out some of the June sun, and made sure to bump into her aunt's chair. She was almost certain this was Agnes. Sleeping or pretending, it was a good time for the older woman to involve herself.

"Oh, goodness! I'm so sorry, Aunt Agnes!" Her words were a little louder than necessary. Caesar gave an affronted *yowl* and jumped down from Agnes' lap to stalk arrogantly for the foyer.

The older woman made a point of blinking theatrically, fluttering her hands about her bosom. "Please excuse me, dear, I was just resting, and must have dropped off." Serena's back was to her aunt and Cam, and felt safe in rolling her eyes. The old interferer had

probably been hoping to catch her niece in a bit of juicy gossip. She and her twin were always trying to out-do one another with their latest stories, even though they no longer lived in the city.

“Oh! Serena, we have a guest! Whyever didn’t you wake me?”

Cam was very polite, helping her aunt out of the chair and answering her questions about his health and his home. She very pointedly did *not* ask after his father, Serena noticed. “Well, my boy, you *will* be joining us for luncheon, I’m sure?” Not giving him a chance to answer, she hurried to the dining room door. “Brixley! Mr. MacLeod will be joining us for the meal!”

“Yes’m, I figured!”

Serena caught Cam’s small smile, and shared it with him. Despite her aunts’ background and ladylike behavior, they each hollered to Brixley like cowhands. And the old servant hollered right back.

The exchange set the mood for the meal. Once Agatha bustled down from her room upstairs, where she very emphatically announced that she *hadn’t* been napping, the three ladies had a lovely time entertaining their guest. Serena’s suspicion that Agnes hadn’t been sleeping was born out by the fact that the aunt in question must have let her twin know about Cam’s request. After that, the always-bossy Agatha quickly took control of the conversation, bringing up Serena’s endowments—physical and otherwise—again and again. It would have been downright embarrassing, had the twinkle in Cam’s eyes not told her that he was perfectly aware of her aunts’ scheming. So she smiled too, and went along with the fun.

And it *was* fun, to her surprise. Since they’d moved back to the Double-S from Cheyenne, she’d dearly missed the chance for socialization, and she knew that her aunts did as well. It was one of the worst parts of the ranch; its loneliness. But having Cam here—a charming, handsome guest—almost made it seem like they were back home in Cheyenne. He certainly knew how to make an afternoon exciting! Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to be married to him after all.

Serena was still debating with herself when the meal was over, and Cam was ready to return to the Open Skye. Marriage to a man like him wouldn’t be entirely a sacrifice, but was it worth living out here forever? She was so deep in thought that she almost didn’t notice when her aunts said their goodbyes and hustled into the parlor with surprising speed, leaving her on the porch to bid farewell to Cam alone.

He stood there, his hat in one hand, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, while she tried not to wring her hands and glare at the parlor door that hadn’t *quite* swung shut the entire way. Those nosy busy-bodies were probably eavesdropping right now!

“I had a real nice time, Miss Serena. Your aunts sure are

characters.”

She smiled up at Cam. Goodness, he was tremendous. She was getting a crick in her neck just looking at him. Serena wanted to step back, to put some distance between them so that she didn't have to crane her neck so far, but she knew that it would be rude.

Instead, she just said, “They really are, and I appreciate you putting up with their antics. They can be sweethearts when they want to be.” That last was said a bit louder, in the hopes the two ‘sweethearts’ would get the point.

“Yeah, you too.”

Serena's lips formed a little “O” of confusion right before Cam's met them. Her first kiss! It was quite warm, and his lips were chapped from the sun. She could feel his scratchy stubble against her cheek, and didn't quite care for the way his kiss seemed to completely overwhelm her. Why, he had to bend almost double to reach her, and she felt like she was in danger of being swallowed. Still, she closed her eyes and tried to appreciate it.

It was over soon enough, when he drew back and placed his hat on his head with a wince. She didn't understand his expression, but tried to smile politely anyhow. Isn't that what one did, after her first kiss?

“Goodbye, Serena. I hope to see you next week.”

She thought that she mumbled her agreement, but wasn't sure. He seemed in a hurry to leave, judging by the length of his stride on the way to the barns where he'd left his horse. He didn't look back, and she sighed, pulling the door behind her. She went to find her aunts and fill them in, before they each positively expired from curiosity.

## CHAPTER TWO



Well, that kiss had been... interesting.

Serena was still thinking about it a few days later. Well, she hadn't *stopped* thinking about it, truthfully. Her first kiss, and it had been... nice. Very nice, she supposed. It's just that... well, she'd been expecting more. The heroines in Wendy's gothic novels always had pounding hearts and shortness of breath, which the girls had interpreted to mean that the kisses must have been truly remarkable.

But she hadn't experienced any of that from Cam's kiss. It was just two sets of lips, pressed against each other. His had been scratchy, which distracted her from whatever she was *sure* she was supposed to have been feeling.

On the other hand, she could hardly fault *him* if *she* hadn't gotten light-headed from his kiss, could she? Maybe there was something wrong with her? Maybe Cam's kisses were spectacular, but she just couldn't appreciate them. Maybe she needed another few tries?

Unfortunately, her aunts hadn't been much help. Oh, they'd seen the kiss, but since neither of them had been married, they couldn't give her any sort of insight into kissing, and she didn't dare ask them anything, for fear of the giggles. As it was, she'd had to spend the last two days listening to them debate between themselves the pros and cons of marrying Cam, as if *they* were the ones tying the knot! It was funny to listen to them argue, because neither could keep the same opinion for very long, jumping back and forth between "she should marry him" and "she doesn't want to live out here for the rest of her life!" As soon as one twin would admit that the opposing point had some validity, the other twin would immediately switch opinions to argue. If they hadn't been articulating exactly what Serena was debating with herself, she might have laughed at the absurdity.

They were at it again, sitting behind her in the buggy. Had they been driving into Cheyenne for one of their weekly visits, Brixley would have been driving, as was proper. But since they were just going to Mr. Barker's spread for the noon meal, she'd had one of the hands hitch up the buggy for her and she was driving, protected by leather gloves and a wide-brimmed sun hat.

Serena was listening to the debate—interspersed with inane chatter about fashion and accusations of ancient wrong-doings—while she guided the horse around a small stand of pines. When she was a

child, her father would have a tree fetched from this bend in the creek for their Christmas tree, and on two occasions she'd been allowed to go along. It had been a wonderful memory. It was also a convenient half-way mark between the two houses.

Ash Barker had owned the stretch north of the Double-S since before she was born, but he'd always been solitary, even after his younger brother came to live with him. It wasn't until he married Molly that he became more sociable, particularly towards a little neighbor girl who'd recently lost her mother. Their home had always been a safe haven of acceptance and laughter.... And of course, the most wonderful food imaginable.

Molly always made a point of cooking each person's favorite foods on their birthdays, and once Serena had come into their lives, the older woman included her in the tradition. Serena always cherished her birthday visit. Her aunts had a standing invitation as well, and she knew that Agnes and Agatha would rather cut off a finger than miss a chance at Molly Murray Barker's cooking. Which is why they were perched behind her, happily bickering all the way to the Barkers' spread.

Like the Double-S, the Barker home sat in the middle of a small rise, with gorgeous views in every direction. There were three large barns, and several corrals, a testament to Ash and Nate's success with their horses. Ash heard them coming—he seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to horses—and was standing ready when she pulled hard on the reins to slow the animal.

"Miss Selkirk." He wore one of those new Stetson hats that Molly had purchased for him for Christmas last year, and tipped it politely to her. She couldn't help the smile that crept across her lips at his attempt at formality. Ash Barker was just as coarse as the rest of the cowboys out here on the Wyoming range, but his roughness made him somehow endearing. He was the biggest man she'd ever seen—bigger than Cam MacLeod, even!—but she'd never been intimidated by him. Perhaps it was because she saw how loving and kind he could be to his brother and the women in his life. She tied off the reins, stretched out her arms in a childish impression of wanting to be picked up, and he lifted her down from the buggy. But before putting her on the ground, he spun her around and squeezed her tightly, like he used to do when she was a girl. "Happy birthday, Serena."

She laughed out loud and hugged him back. "I've missed you all so much!"

"Ash Barker! You put that poor young lady down before you break her in half, and come help me down!"

"Help us down, I think you mean, Agatha."

"I'm older, so if that fine example of manhood is going to be



helping *anyone* down, it will be me. *You* he may help after.”

“Perhaps, but since *I* am ever so much lighter than you are, *I* should be the one—”

Serena heard her aunt gasp in outrage. “Agnes Elizabeth Selkirk! You ought to be ashamed!”

A giggle escaped once more when Ash sighed and put her down. “Annie’s in the barn. She’s excited to see you.” He raised his voice and turned towards the buggy. “Miss Selkirk! And Miss Selkirk. You’re both looking even prettier than the last time we were in town, if that’s possible. Can I help you down?”

Serena left them bickering over who would go first, and ducked into the barn.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but even after they did she didn’t see her friend anywhere. She knew better than to call, though, so she took a few cautious steps towards the center of the building, and jumped when one of the horses turned his head towards her and blew, hard. Having grown up here in the Territory, she’d known how to ride since she was a young girl. But she’d always thought of horses as a necessary evil, preferring the convenience of a buggy when possible, and rarely having to saddle or care for a horse herself.

So she’d never understood little Annie’s affiliation with the big beasts. The girl loved horses, and even Ash admitted that she’d been a tremendous help in building their stock. Nate called her a centaur, after Wendy had read them all a story about those mythical half-horse creatures, and Annie loved the comparison.

And Serena should have known better than to think that Annie didn’t know she was there in the barn. Annie seemed to know everything that went on in ‘her’ barn; the horses’ interest in this interloper must have communicated to her, because soon enough Serena saw her friend’s face peering around the corner. When Annie realized who it was, she launched herself at the young woman, and Serena hugged her back just as fiercely.

“Ahbee bah-day, Seea!”

“Thank you, Annie!” It was rare to hear the girl speak, so Serena knew it was a special occasion. “My aunts are outside, and we are excited to see you all again.” As always, Serena spoke slowly to the deaf girl, knowing that she could understand much just from the shapes lips made when they spoke. Annie had been left without hearing after fighting German Measles at age three, so she was able to understand words and even speak a little. But the best way to communicate had been a sort of sign ‘language’ Wendy had developed over the years. And she’d been reading and writing from a very young age. Serena fondly recalled perfectly silent afternoons in the sisters’ room, the three girls communicating only in writing and sign.

“I can’t wait to see Molly and the boys, but first....” She smiled down at the thirteen-year-old, “How are your foals? Do you have any more?”

Annie’s smile grew even wider, if such a thing were possible, and nodded excitedly. “Six!” she happily signed. When Ash took Nate’s advice about breeding their mustangs, it didn’t take long for them to realize that Annie had a special way with the baby horses. They were her own private domain, and she adored caring for them, and helping to train them. Over the last years, she was often the first one to ride the horses, and she took great pride in knowing that she was helping her brothers-in-law.

The girl was excited to show off the latest additions to their herd, and lingered over a beautiful pale foal, hardly taller than her. She told Serena that this one had been born late.

“But she’s your favorite? I can tell.” Annie nodded happily. “She’s lovely, prettier than the others, definitely.” Serena might not love horses, but she couldn’t resist stroking this one’s velvety nose. She really *was* adorable. “But I’ve lingered too long in here already. My aunts are certainly making life difficult for Molly. I’m a poor guest if I ask her to cook for me, and then leave two nosy old ladies in her house!”

Annie giggled, and hurried to lead the foal back to her mother. Then the girl linked her arm through Serena’s, and they strolled towards the house.

The welcome was warm, and the meal delicious, as always. Serena loved visiting the Barkers, because of all the laughter. Even Annie joined in the teasing, with Molly translating for Aunt Agnes and Aunt Agatha.

As Serena had hoped, the meal was almost entirely baked goods, since Molly knew of her sweet tooth. The older woman had once wanted to open a bakery, and her desserts were still phenomenal; Serena adored them, and always looked forward to her one meal a year of cookies, cakes, pastries and pies. And as he did every year, Nate moaned and groaned about missing meat and potatoes... and then ate everything with gusto. The rest of them might not have such a big sweet tooth, but they all loved Molly’s desserts just the same.

And just like in years past, Serena was the last one eating. Molly laughed, as Ash pushed his plate away with a groan and patted his stomach, and Serena reached for one more cookie. “I swear, Serena, I don’t know where you put all of this! You’d think you’d be my size, the way you eat my pastries, but you’re still as tiny as Annie!”

Serena blushed, but finished the cookie anyway. Primly wiping her mouth with a napkin, she stood up to help Molly clear the dishes. “I only get to do this once a year, and it’s worth it!”

“Well, I’m sending the rest of the cookies and that cake home with you, so you can enjoy them again tomorrow at least.”

Nate and the boys started to protest, but Molly shook a spoon in their direction. “You get whatever *you* want on your birthday, and just a while ago you were complaining about all these sweets.”

“No I wasn’t!” Noah was three now, and very aware that he was the youngest. He tried his hardest to make sure that his brother got his share of the blame. “It was Peter!”

Peter flicked a juicy pie blueberry to land on Noah’s cheek. “No it wasn’t, brat. It was Uncle Nate.”

Noah howled and would have launched himself across the table towards the five-year-old, had Nate not grabbed him by his collar. “Sit down, Noah. Pete, apologize now. You’re giving Miss Agatha palpitations, and embarrassing your mother.”

It was Agnes having the palpitations, but Serena saw no reason to correct Nate. Besides, she was pretty sure her aunt’s act was merely for show, to shame the boys. The warning did the trick, and both boys mumbled apologies. Serena shared a smile with Molly as they gathered up the dishes.

“So, Serena.” Ash leaned back in his chair and accepted the cup of coffee she handed him with a smile. “Twenty now, and full owner of the Double-S. How does it feel?”

She sat down with a sigh. “No different than I felt last month. I’m still floundering, although I appreciate all of the help and advice you’ve given me. I’m just no good at this sort of thing.”

“Sounds to me,” Ash exchanged a look with Molly, “You could use someone there full-time with you. A partner?”

“A husband, you mean!” Aunt Agatha chimed in. “Ranching is a dirty, rough job, and Serena is a lady. No business being involved in it in any way!”

“But she could if she wants.” Of course Agnes had to take the opposing view, just to spite her sister. “She’s a smart girl and could do anything she wanted. Ranching is in her blood!”

“I’m not saying she *couldn’t*, only that she *shouldn’t* have to. She should get married and let her husband do the work.”

“And I’m saying that she doesn’t have to get married for such a silly reason. She can run the Double-S as well as any man.”

“But she doesn’t *want* to!”

As always, her aunts’ bickering left little room for any other opinion, but Molly managed to squeeze a word in edge-wise. “What *do* you plan to do with the ranch, Serena?”

She sighed again. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t *want* to run it, but I don’t think I have any other options.”

Noah climbed into his father’s lap, and Ash rested his chin on the

small head of brown curls. "Well, whatdya want to do instead, Aunt Serena?"

She smiled at the cherub. "Honestly?" She sighed. "As much as I love being here with you, I really enjoyed the years I spent in Cheyenne at my aunts' home." When she'd turned fifteen, her aunts had convinced their brother that she needed a womanly influence, and she'd moved into their stately three-story home in the city. They were so devoted to her that they'd moved to the ranch upon Stanley Selkirk's death, but they still made weekly trips to the city, staying in their old house on Saturday nights before church.

"Why don'tcha move back?" Pete's mouth was full; Serena suspected he'd pilfered another cookie.

She gently corrected him. "Why *don't you*." He nodded, still looking expectant. "The Double-S supports us." She glanced towards her aunts, smiling. "Someone has to run it, in order for it to make money. We can't live in Cheyenne without any money."

Annie pounded on the table to get their attention, and then signed, "You could open a bakery." They all chuckled at the reminder of how Molly had planned to do just that in Cheyenne, before Ash had hired her as a housekeeper. Annie continued, "There are plenty of other jobs for smart ladies in Cheyenne."

Serena smiled sadly. "I don't have any experience, though. I can't cook, I don't like to clean, and I'm not very good at running the ranch, much less something less familiar. The only thing I'm good at is reading and daydreaming with you and Wendy!"

The middle Murray sister had been gone for a little over a year now, since she turned nineteen, and everyone missed her terribly. They exchanged weekly letters, but it wasn't the same as having her there with them. Serena noticed the look Molly and Annie exchanged, and was sorry she'd brought up Wendy's name.

But the person at the table that looked most haunted at the casual mention was Nate. Serena always thought he had lovely hazel eyes, but now she'd caught the positively tortured look in them before he turned away. She wondered if he missed Wendy more than he wanted the rest of his family to know.

Years ago, the other girl had told Serena that Nate was going to marry her, whether he knew it or not. They'd giggled over the thought—Wendy and Nate were practically siblings!—but Serena had respected the claim enough to never consider Nate as a possible beau. And it had been difficult, as he'd grown into a fine figure of a man; lithe and sinewy rather than burly like his brother. He still wore his dark hair long, and when it wasn't pulled back he looked just like the Indian his grandmother had been. And something about Wendy's absence was painful to him.

“Nate?”

Hazel eyes darted towards her, and then away. He cleared his throat. “Speaking of marriage, though, Cam MacLeod rode over here a few weeks ago.”

“Nate!” Molly scolded. “We weren’t going to tell her about that.”

He shrugged. “She has a right to know that he’s interested in courting her.”

“She knows!” Aunt Agnes’ shriek was positively gleeful. “He came wooing the other day, and—”

“He *kissed* her!” Her sister interrupted to impart that juicy bit of gossip.

“Oh, did he?” Ash suddenly sat forward in his chair, and Serena blushed.

“Yes, but it was fine.”

“Just fine?” Molly’s brows rose, and she put her hand gently on her husband’s forearm. Ash sat back again.

“Didja kiss him back?” Peter’s question would have been impertinent had they not been like family, and Serena was blushing too hard to correct his grammar. His mother scolded him anyhow, though.

Agatha harrumphed. “She most certainly did not. She feels nothing for that course lout.”

“Agatha Marie! A few hours ago you said that he was a fine example of manhood.”

Aunt Agatha turned her nose up at her sister’s inconvenient memory. “Be that as it may, he’s still a course lout, kissing our Serena. And you heard her; she said the kiss was ‘fine’. Manly or not, obviously she’s not interested in his kisses.”

Serena attempted to make peace. “I said it was ‘fine’, I didn’t say I didn’t like it.”

Molly and Ash chuckled, and her aunts looked smug. “If the kiss was ‘fine’, sweetie,” Molly reached out, and her husband twined his fingers through hers, “Then it wasn’t meant to be. A *real* kiss would be *much* more than fine.”

Serena couldn’t help but be curious. Her aunts had never had these sorts of conversations with her, because they were as inexperienced when it came to men as she herself was. “How?”

“Well....” Molly blushed slightly and looked at Ash, who cleared his throat and looked at the ceiling. “When you share a kiss with someone special, you just... know. It’s difficult to describe, but something... magical passes between you.” Annie, Molly, and Serena all sighed together.

“Aaaaaand that’s my cue to leave.” Nate pushed back from the table. “Boys, you want to come over to my house and help me get

Serena's presents?"

"Yeah!" Noah and Peter jumped down from their chairs, where they were obviously bored with the adults' conversation, and ran for the door in front of their uncle. Shortly after Peter was born, Ash had helped his brother build a small house nearby. Now the boys stayed there in the summer months as often as in their own little room their father had subdivided for them in the larger house.

Annie giggled as she watched her nephews run out, and then knocked on the table to get everyone's attention. "Tell Serena about the new teacher!"

"Oh!" Molly chuckled. "How did we forget to tell you the big news?" She let go of her husband's hand to sign for Annie while she spoke. "Ash and I have been talking about the possibility of sending Annie to Cheyenne for school. The Central School has been doing very well for years now, and we like the idea of a 'high school', where older students can attend. Wendy made sure that Annie is well-educated, but we'd like for her to have the opportunity—even for a year—to go to a school. We've been corresponding with the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and he agreed to advertise for a teacher who had some experience with inclusive education."

"What's this 'inclusive education'?" Agnes was just as interested as her sister, but spoke up first.

"Just that this teacher has taught different kinds of students, sometimes at the same time. We were interested in a teacher from one of the schools for the deaf out east, of course, but that was a long shot, with Annie being the only deaf student around. Instead, we're getting a teacher who hails from New York, but who taught in *England!*" Molly smiled at Ash. "We've been corresponding with him—his name is Carderock—and we think he'll be a wonderful addition to Cheyenne. He doesn't use sign, because he's an oralist, but we think that Annie will be able to learn from him. And it will be wonderful for her to have a chance to attend a school with so many other students her age."

Serena was almost as excited as Annie, judging from her friend's happy smile. "Oh, Annie, that's *amazing!* I'm so happy for you!" She jumped out of her seat to hug the girl. Annie squealed with joy.

"Me! In school!" Her signs were rapid and jerky, but Serena had been communicating with her for years, and had no trouble understanding. "I can't believe it!"

"The Superintendent is so progressive," She had to finger-spell that, since she didn't know if Wendy had ever developed a word for 'superintendent' or 'progressive', "to consider such a teacher. I can't wait to meet this Mr. Carderock, and hear all about his plans!"

Ash cleared his throat. "About that..." Serena and her aunts turned

to him. "We were hoping that Molly and Annie and the boys could stay with you in town. Mr. Carderock will arrive in two weeks or so, and since you never miss the big celebration..."

"Of course!" Cheyenne citizens always outdid themselves for the Fourth of July celebrations, with the picnic and parade and bonfire. "I can't believe I almost forgot about Independence Day!"

"The best part of summer!" Her aunts' proclamations were nearly simultaneous, and they both dissolved into giggles afterwards.

"I'm sure that the Double-S can survive without us for a few days. I'd love to spend a while in town, catching up with friends. Aunt Agatha, Aunt Agnes, what do you think?" She turned to the older ladies, unconsciously mimicking Annie's hopeful gaze.

Her aunts glanced at each other, and one—Serena was pretty sure it was Agatha—said "We think that regardless of *your* plans for the Fourth, young lady, we'll be in town. We'd love to have the Barkers stay with us, if the boys can stay with Molly, and Serena doesn't mind sharing her room with Annie again."

This time, Serena's squeal matched Annie's, and they hugged again.

Molly's smile was content. "That is very kind of you to host us each year, Aunt Agatha and Aunt Agnes. Noah and Peter will be on their best behavior, and I know they will just *love* the celebrations. And staying in town with you will allow us to meet Mr. Carderock, and make sure he's comfortable in Cheyenne before school begins again." She gasped. "Oh, maybe he could be our guest at the celebrations. He'd probably enjoy seeing first-hand that we're just as sophisticated as the cities back east!"

Serena nodded, but didn't have high hopes. Molly and her sisters had come from Chicago, where they'd had a happy home before the Great Fire. She and Wendy had often mentioned how cosmopolitan Cheyenne was becoming, and Serena herself loved the city. But it was hard to imagine a dusty old British teacher being impressed by Cheyenne. Why, he was used to cities like London and New York; she was surprised that someone of his caliber was willing to travel west at all. He probably had a weak heart from years spent indoors, and wouldn't be able to appreciate what they *did* have in their lovely city.

"Good!" Agnes nodded emphatically. "Let's say that we'll be in town on the twenty-fifth? That's two weeks from now, and should give you time to welcome this teacher, and prepare for the celebrations. Serena, can you stand to be away from the ranch for so long?"

She almost groaned, acknowledging how excited she was to have the chance to be back in the city, and to ignore her duties on the Double-S. "Maybe by then I'll have an idea of what to *do* with the ranch!"

“And hopefully Nate and I can come out and join you on the fourth.” Molly and Annie—and Wendy, when she was here—had always stayed with Serena and her aunts during the Fourth of July celebration. Ash and his brother had often come into the city for just the day and evening, to celebrate with them, not being able to take any more time away from their spread.

Serena found herself becoming giddy. The news of Annie’s new opportunities, and the anticipation of the big picnic, parade, and bonfire had her feeling like a girl again. The worries and thoughts of Cam’s kiss were positively pushed out of her head. She wanted to laugh... and so she did.

She was going to enjoy Independence Day, like she always had in the past, and free of any of these new ‘grown-up’ worries. Her friends and family were all around her, and she was going to have a beautiful time, by God.

So she was grinning when Nate and the boys returned with three adorably wrapped gifts—a ‘horse’ carving from Pete, a set of beautifully monogrammed handkerchiefs from Annie, and a her own copy of Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*—and spent the rest of the afternoon surrounded by her loved ones.

And through it all, she didn’t think of Cam MacLeod—or his “just fine” kiss—once.



## CHAPTER THREE



Cheyenne really was very impressive. As Sebastian strolled around the city, he couldn't help but compare it to the New York City of a hundred years ago. But he could see the potential, could see the growth. Why, many of the buildings had scaffolding erected, as if parts of the city were being built before his very eyes. There was a hustle and bustle he hadn't seen west of St. Louis, with workmen scurrying around at a frantic pace. He thought they looked a little like ants, determined to raise their city before the snows closed in again, making building impossible.

The streets were dirt—he assumed it wouldn't take much to turn them into mud—and few of the buildings were over three stories tall. Sebastian assumed that here in the Wyoming Territory, where the land seemed endless, it was easier to build *out* than up. But it was a growing city all the same. There were poles carrying electrical current to the homes and fancy businesses on 17<sup>th</sup> Street and beyond, and he'd seen as many electrical lights as gas-powered ones. Why, there was even a brand-new 'telephone' exchange, and that device had only been patented five years before! Sebastian had been lucky enough to hear Mr. Bell speak about it when that learned man was in England to demonstrate the telephone to the Queen, and had been fascinated by the possibilities it presented. He'd urged his father to invest in the new technology, and was surprised to find it this far west.

In fact, he was pleasantly surprised by most of Cheyenne. Even though the Territory wasn't officially a state yet, he knew it was only a matter of time. The city felt full of potential, and there were opportunities for expansion everywhere he turned.

These opportunities were, of course, the reason he'd given his father for his rash move. He'd returned from teaching at Eton late last year, and endured the social season with his mother happily, because he'd been away from his family for so long. But soon he was chafing. Not at the city—he'd always loved the sophistication of his native New York, convinced that only London could match it—but at the inactivity. His father still went into his office every day, even though he'd turned most of the reins of the investment firm over to Sebastian's older brother. His sister's husband also worked for

Carderock Investments, and even his layabout younger brother, who at twenty-two *still* hadn't figured out what to do with his life, had a good enough head for sums that their father occasionally employed him for various tasks. But Sebastian had become a teacher—a math teacher, since he'd inherited the Carderock skill with numbers—because he felt like there wasn't a place for him in the family business. His father already had all of the help he needed, and Sebastian didn't *like* imports and exports as much as pure math.

His father hadn't liked the idea of his namesake gallivanting off west, but Sebastian had inherited a sizable sum from his grandfather. It was enough to keep him in comfort, which is how his younger brother Reginald was using it. But after the Eton job ended, Sebastian had convinced Sebastian, Sr. that the western cities deserved some attention from Carderock Investments. So he'd responded to an advertisement for a teacher in their public school, explained to his parents that it would only be for a year, and that he'd use the time to investigate investment possibilities.

But now that he was here, Sebastian was wondering if it *would* only be for a year. The entire city was on the verge of expanding, of becoming something truly remarkable. He could almost taste the excitement and anticipation, and very much wanted to be a part of it. *This* was the reason he'd left New York in the first place; the knowledge that there was nothing new to try there, and the desire to tackle new jobs and new problems. The desire to *do* something new.

New! That was it; Cheyenne, Wyoming was a *brand-new* city, full of potential, and Sebastian wanted to explore that potential. Ten years ago—five years ago!—this had been little more than a town situated on the railroad, but now it was a metropolis to rival some of the eastern cities... and it was growing exponentially. Why, he'd heard talk that the city was going to be lit soon with electric incandescent lamps, and even New York didn't have those in the streets, yet!

He felt like whistling, but contented himself with smile instead. He didn't want anyone to see him and think he was too flippant or young for the serious job of math teacher. But truthfully, semesters spent with adolescents had kept him feeling younger than his twenty-five years, and he'd been known to engage in a bout of kickball or a skipping race. His mother would have palpitations if she'd ever found out.

A shout got his attention, and he turned to watch several young men zoom by on Penny-Farthing bicycles. His smile grew. He'd spent some time behind the handlebars of the contraptions, and loved the smooth speed they provided, for all of their cumbersome bulk. Now *there* went a vehicle of the future, never mind horses and buggies!

His older brother Bertrand had laughed when Sebastian stated his

desire to visit Cheyenne, saying that he'd never imagined his younger brother riding a horse to his one-room school house. Sebastian had chuckled at the image, but agreed that he was a city boy through-and-through. He'd ridden horses, of course, but much preferred the simplicity of a buggy, or the bicycle... or his own two feet. He knew that he was unusual in his fondness for strolling, but he did his best thinking afoot, and firmly believed that it was the best way to explore a new town. Or a brand-new, potential-filled city. Of course, that's not to say that when Cheyenne eventually got around to implementing the horse-tram, he wouldn't take full advantage of that conveyance...

This morning he was strolling down 17<sup>th</sup> Street towards the future site of the Stock-Growers National Bank. He'd met one of the partners two days before in the lobby of the Inter-Ocean hotel, where he was staying for the time being. Mr. Henry Hay had a booming voice and a strong handshake, and had startled Sebastian when he'd approached from behind.

"Sebastian Carderock! If that don't beat all!"

Sebastian's boxing instructor would have been proud of the way he'd whirled about, prepared for anything... but his father would have been proud of the way he'd reined in his defensive impulses and instead stuck out a hand for a crushing handshake. He *was* a representative of Carderock Investments, after all.

And it turned out that was why Hay had wanted to speak to him. "I knew your daddy back east, son. How's he doing?"

"Fine sir. Still managing as much of the business as they'll let him."

"Good, good. A mutual friend told me you'd be in town, nosing around for some good investment opportunities, and have I got one for you!"

He didn't have time to explain that he was here because he'd accepted a teaching position, before Mr. Hay had invited him to dinner at the Cheyenne Club, and insisted on showing him "the sights", as he'd called the tour of city's elite districts.

Dinner that evening at the Cheyenne Gentleman's Club had been intriguing. It was a grand building with a full porch, two curving staircases, and separate dining and smoking rooms. It even had a tennis court. Yes sir, it was something right out of London or New York... until he'd met the members. Of the two hundred members, most of them were ranch owners, and Hay told him they represented most of the Territory's wealth. They were hard men, used to working in the hot sun and cold snow and getting what they wanted. Some of them looked positively medieval. They had a particular habit of pairing their fine ditto suits with cowboy hats and boots. One man, lounging in the reading room, was still wearing his spurs.

He'd met a Mr. J.M. Carey, a Thomas Sturgis, and a man with the

unlikely name of Ithamar C. Whipple, all founders of the Stock-Growers National Bank, and all interested in having the Carderock family invest in it. And from what he'd heard that evening, it was a good investment opportunity.

And so he was on his way to meet Mr. Hay in the bank's temporary offices, and see the blueprints for what he was assured would be the "grandest bank in the Territory". Before he reached the corner, though, he couldn't help but turn to look down 17<sup>th</sup> Street towards Millionaire's Row. He'd unbuttoned his jacket in the heat, and he stood there, hands shoved deeply in his pockets, contemplating the grand avenue. It was only a few years removed from its humble origins, but Cheyenne, Wyoming was the pride of the Territory, and rightly so.

Yes, Cheyenne was growing, and he wanted to be here to help it grow. To grow with it. He could do his family some good out here, too, which is more than could be said for lounging around New York, wasting his inheritance on the social whirl or laboring over a ledger and set of books. Here he could educate children, to make sure that they grew into responsible citizens. Here he could offer his family's influence to make sure the city grew into its potential.

Here he could be useful.

Sebastian couldn't wait to start.



"M'at!"

It was still so much of a surprise to hear Annie speak that Serena stopped short, causing the girl—whose hand she'd been holding—to stumble a bit. Molly had explained that since finding out that Mr. Carderock was an oralist, the family had been encouraging Annie to speak as much as possible. She still had trouble with certain consonants, and lacked confidence, but Serena was so proud of the effort she was making.

However, she was most comfortable in her own language, and pulled her hand free of Serena's to sign "I left my hat inside."

Serena nodded, and stepped to one side of the walkway in front of the church, allowing the last of the Sunday stragglers to move towards the street. She smiled and returned greetings from neighbors and acquaintances. It felt wonderful to be back home, and exciting to know that she'd be here for longer than their usual overnight trips. She and her aunts had only missed their weekly Saturday dinners at the Inter-Ocean and Sunday morning church services when the snow had been too deep to make the trip into town. Cam MacLeod had often joined them for their ride back to their ranches on Sunday

afternoon.

She'd written to Wendy, telling her all about Cam's proposal. She described his kiss in detail, knowing her friend would want to know all about the experience, including the way it made her feel. Or rather, the way it *didn't* make her feel. She'd also explained why she was hesitant to accept his proposal, but expected that Wendy knew her well enough to know why. There'd been a reply from Wendy waiting in Cheyenne yesterday—her friend knew they'd be in town for the celebration—that had been as enthusiastic as she'd hoped. Wendy was excited about Serena's first kiss, and waxed poetic about it for two whole pages. She used the phrase "True Love" *three* times, and seemed to completely miss the part about Serena not wanting to marry Cam. Serena wondered why her friend was so focused on the romance, rather than the practicality.

Serena wished there was a way she could chat with her best friend, but contented herself with writing a long letter full of all the town excitement. And as promised, Molly and Annie and the boys had arrived at her aunts' home yesterday, and they were all settled in. Often, when Molly stayed with them, they gave Brixley the evening off and let her pamper them with her wonderful cooking. This morning—after the most delicious flapjack breakfast that Serena could recall—they attended service at the First Congregational Church. The Barkers had been visiting her church since Reverend McCullough had passed away, but they weren't able to make it into town nearly as often as Serena did. And unfortunately, little Noah had an accident half-way through the service, and Molly had taken her sons home for a change of clothes.

After the service, Agnes and Agatha were pulled aside by Mrs. Davis, the head of the Ladies' Club, and they were soon embroiled in a good-natured discussion about preparations for the upcoming Independence Day celebrations. The ladies from the churches were the lead organizers, and judging from her aunts' animated gestures, they were excited to be back in the thick of things.

When the crowd cleared, Serena glanced once more towards the knot of ladies—with several bored husbands standing by—and then nodded Annie back towards the church. The two of them slipped back through the large doors that stood beneath the three-story bell tower, and into the nave of the church. As they strolled down the aisle towards their customary pew, Serena noticed Reverend Davis chatting with two gentlemen near the altar. The only reason she paid them any attention was that it was unusual for the Reverend not to be outside greeting his parishioners.

But once she did, she admitted herself intrigued. One of the gentlemen was rotund and familiar to her, but before she could place

his name, the last member of the trio drew her attention when he nonchalantly bounced his hat against one leg. He faced the Reverend, so she could only see his profile, but he was dressed in the height of fashion in an *actual* morning suit, and absentmindedly fiddling with the matching top hat. She couldn't recall the last time she'd seen a man in anything more formal than a ditto suit, other than in the pages of the fashion magazines her aunts favored.

And then Annie made an excited noise of discovery as she found her hat shoved under the pew, and the trio of gentlemen turned at the sound, and Serena forgot how to breathe.

Dear Lord in Heaven, he was *perfect*. She had never seen a more beautiful man, and here she stood in her out-of-date flowered gown. She must look like some backwater rube to such a sophisticated gentleman. He had thick brown hair that was swept back off of his forehead, piercing dark eyes, and high, elegant cheekbones. When he smiled at her, a dimple appeared in his left cheek, and she felt her knees go weak.

*Oh my.*

It wasn't just that he was handsome; it was that he was so urbane. He was exactly the way she'd always pictured a cultured, refined gentleman, and he was standing here in *her* church. She sighed, and heard Annie echo it.

"Ah! Miss Selkirk! Miss Murray!" Serena dragged her gaze away from the vision to glance at his companions. She now recognized the third gentleman as Mr. James Donaldson, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, who had always been a little nervous around Annie. She recalled meeting him after church on several occasions, and if Annie was with them, he would often forget that the girl couldn't hear him, and chat mindlessly with her. Annie never minded, though; it often wasn't until she tried to return his conversation that Mr. Donaldson remembered that she didn't speak.

"How opportune this meeting is! I was just saying to Reverend Davis that we should arrange a meeting with you ladies before the Independence Day celebrations."

Serena wasn't listening, much less interpreting for Annie. Good Heavens, they were coming this way! They were going to speak to her! What was Mr. Donaldson saying? She realized that she was frantically trying to smooth down the fly-aways around her face, and gripped her hands together tightly before her.

The dream in front of her smiled slightly, and gave a little bow, and her heart sped up. He looked like a prince! A prince in a gothic tale worthy of True Love. Imagine someone like *him* bowing to her!

Oh God, now he was looking at her expectantly, and she had *no idea* what Mr. Donaldson had said. But the prince was obviously

expecting something from her, so she stuck her hand out and cleared her throat. "How do you do, Mister...?"

This time his grin was broad enough to bring that dimple back, and reveal even white teeth. She was about to upbraid herself for being a ninny by noticing a man's teeth when he started to chuckle. She wasn't sure why he was laughing, but Good Heavens, his eyes had a definite sparkle to them. She suddenly didn't care if he were laughing at her, if she could continue to watch those dark eyes shine.

He took her hand and held it for a moment. He didn't shake it, like the ranchers did when they wanted to settle business, and his palms weren't calloused and rough either. He was everything a gentleman should be... and then he gave her hand a little squeeze and *goodness* it was warm today, wasn't it?

Mr. Donaldson cleared his throat. "As I was saying, my dear, this is Mr. Sebastian Carderock, the new math teacher from Eton. He's recently arrived to get his bearings in Cheyenne, before the start of the new half. I think you two young ladies will be very impressed with his experience and vision for our Central School here."

Serena had stopped listening. Truly, her mind had blanked after Mr. Donaldson said her prince's name. *This* was Annie's new teacher? This was the man from England, whom she'd imagined to be old and dusty and lacking in adventure? Why, nothing could be farther from the truth! She felt a blush working its way up out of the high neckline of her dress, and hoped that it was at least adding a little pinkness to her pale cheeks. Heavens, he was handsome, wasn't he?

Surely there was *something* she should say, but all she could think was that she was going to have to write another letter to Wendy immediately, to tell her all about Cheyenne's new schoolteacher.



Sebastian thought that he could look at Miss Serena Selkirk all day. She was a delight, and she hadn't said ten words to him yet. He wondered what she'd been thinking about as she stared at him so bemusedly; the longer it went on, the funnier it became. He didn't want her to think that he was laughing at her distraction, though, so he managed to keep his smiles hidden... until she completely missed Mr. Donaldson's introduction. Then he couldn't help the chuckle that escaped.

Her pretty little mouth formed a perfect "oh" of realization, and her flawless skin took on a pink hue of embarrassment. It was obvious that she had been too distracted by something to pay attention to the Superintendent's words.

Sebastian thought it amusing, until he realized that he was still

holding her hand. He couldn't help staring at her; she really was exquisite. He couldn't recall seeing anyone who matched her, and he'd spent the last six months being paraded in front of New York society's young marriageable ladies by his very hopeful mother. But Serena Selkirk outshone them all. A tiny little thing, but definitely not a girl. She was wearing a simple but fashionable dress. The slightest hint of a bustle was balanced out by a slim waist and a small—put pert—bosom. He quickly dragged his gaze back to her face, so that she wouldn't know he'd been admiring her, and caught his breath again.

She was perfect. Physically perfect. Flawless skin, a pink bow-shaped mouth, and were her eyes *violet*? He thought he could gaze into them forever and not get bored. Her hair was almost silver, and pulled back in a hairstyle that did nothing to detract from her beauty. The little hairs that had escaped from the pins flew around her face, and he wanted nothing more than to tuck them back up, to feel if they were as silky as they looked. To touch her.

He knew he was staring, but didn't bother to stop. And then he heard Reverend Davis' throat-clearing, and wondered how long the man had been trying to get his attention. Sebastian had to smile—at himself this time—and acknowledge that he'd been just as distracted as Miss Selkirk had been.

"I'm sorry Reverend." He finally dropped her hand, and noticed the way she used those same lithe fingers to pat a few loose hairs back into place, the way he'd wanted to. Instead of lingering further, though, he turned to his two hosts. "Can you repeat that?"

Reverend Davis must have been amused by their mutual preoccupation, judging from his smile. "Well, son, I was just pointing out—*again*—that Miss Selkirk's young companion is Miss Annie Murray, whose family you've been corresponding with."

A flurry of movement from Miss Selkirk that drew his interest again, and he watched her gesturing to the girl by her side. Sebastian finally turned his attention to young Annie, whom he knew to be thirteen. The girl was even slighter than Miss Selkirk, with big brown eyes now wide in surprise and brown shoulder-length curls pulled back off her face with a ribbon. Her hands were quick as she asked Miss Selkirk a question in home sign, and Sebastian hid his discomfort at not being able to understand her.

Three years ago at Eton, he'd taught a boy name Harry who was almost entirely deaf. The masters had tried to turn him towards what they called "a more appropriate learning environment", but Sebastian—who was new to the school himself—had argued that mathematics was an international language, and didn't require hearing or speech to learn. He'd become obsessed with proving his theory right, and had read everything Mr. Alexander G. Bell and others wrote on the subject.



He'd come to agree with Bell that the most likely way to assimilate students like Harry and Annie was to focus on the spoken word, and teach them to understand and speak to others. There were times when he wondered if he only thought that because he hadn't learned any kind of sign language... but he'd had great success with Mr. Bell's oralist techniques. When he'd resigned from Eton, ready to come home, young Harry was one of his best pupils, and exhibited an understanding of pure mathematics that would soon outstrip his own.

Annie's sister had written that the girl could 'read' lips, and had retained some speaking abilities, making her a prime candidate for traditional schools via oralist techniques. So he turned to the girl, and gave her a little nod and a warm smile. "Good morning, Miss Murray." As with Harry, he made sure that he spoke clearly and succinctly, but didn't over-accentuate his lips' movements. "I have been looking forward to meeting you."

He put out his hand, and after a hesitant glance in her companion's direction, Annie placed her small one in his for a quick shake. She pulled her hand back immediately, and moved both hands in front of her chest to begin signing... but a slight movement from Miss Selkirk—Sebastian thought it might have been a head-shake—caused her to reconsider. Sebastian watched uncertainty flit across her face, before being replaced with determination. She dropped her hands and straightened her back, and lifted her chin to look into his eyes.

"Ello, Mistah Cahda-ah."

*Hello, Mister Carderock.* Sebastian had understood her, and allowed his pride and pleasure to show in his smile. Despite her sister's claims, he hadn't been sure that young Annie would really be able to learn from him if he didn't use sign. He'd been impressed to see her struggle and overcome her awkwardness with speaking. That willingness to try, more than her actual ability, would be what would make her a successful student.

"I am looking forward to teaching you in school, Annie. You will do very well, I can tell."

Those wide brown eyes turned to Miss Selkirk in uncertainty, and Sebastian watched her companion interpret his words into sign. He didn't push the matter; he had to expect that Annie wouldn't be able to understand everything right away, and know that she was most comfortable in sign 'language'. Just the fact that she'd been willing to attempt to speak to him, and to focus on his speech, meant that she would be a good student, of both math and oralism.

"It was very nice to meet both of you ladies." He'd been facing Annie when he spoke, so that she could see his mouth, but he watched Miss Selkirk. She was signing, but when she noticed his gaze, her hands faltered once, and then she blushed and continued to gesture.

Sebastian waited until she was through, and then held out his hand to her again. There was no need for it, other than he wanted to touch her again.

“We were hoping to meet you before the celebrations on the Fourth, Mr. Carderock.” Sebastian knew his gaze was centered on that bow-shaped mouth, and he couldn’t help it. “We would be most honored if you would join us for luncheon at my aunts’ home this afternoon?”

“Sadly, I am previously engaged.” The line sounded trite, but was very true. “Mr. Donaldson and his lovely wife have invited the Davises and me to dine with him. I hope I can join you for luncheon later in the week?”

She smiled then. Good Lord, he’d thought she was lovely before, in her pristine calm? This smile, this first real smile she’d shown, lit up her face from within. Her flawless pale skin seemed to glow, and he vowed to make her smile again.

He wasn’t entirely sure how he said his farewells to the two young ladies, but he watched them sashay down the aisle between the pews. Miss Selkirk looked back once, and he smiled at her.

He heard Reverend Davis chuckle. “Well son, looks like you’ve fallen for our Miss Serena, just like every other unmarried man in Cheyenne.”

Sebastian watched the door swing shut behind the young ladies, and had to grin in response. “Looks like it, Reverend. She certainly is beautiful.”

The two gentlemen—and later their wives over luncheon—were quick to volunteer everything Sebastian might wish to know about Serena Selkirk’s background. But he found himself pondering questions they couldn’t answer. What did she dream about? How did she taste? And when was he going to see her again.

## CHAPTER FOUR



“Da, does this beef stew have any actual *beef* in it?”

“Aye, fer flavorin’. Cows don’t grow on trees. Besides, carrots an’ potatoes are healthier.”

Cam hid his smile and hunched back over his bowl of stew. His father was an alright cook, but he had trouble grasping the idea of “plenty”. Cam and the Open Skye hands often had to make do with watered-down stews or wilted vegetables the old man wasn’t ready to throw away. His father had grown up so poor that the idea of beef *in* the stew was a novelty, Cam couldn’t blame him for trying to skimp and stretch. He was glad that he’d waited to bring his father out here ‘til the lean years were past; if he’d been here in the beginning, Ian MacLeod would have had them all drinking boiled cabbage for years.

“We own a cattle ranch, Da. Cows don’t grow on trees, they grow big on all that fine Wyoming grass,” he jerked his head towards the small cabin’s front door, “and that hay you were moaning about having to cut. We have plenty of beef.”

“If ye don’t like my cookin’, you know what ye can do about it!” Ian’s glare was fierce, but Cam just rolled his eyes. His father had been after him to marry for a few years now, but Cam had brushed off his nagging. One of the recurring themes was that they needed a woman around the house, to do the cooking Ian disliked.

“You *know* I’m working on it. I’ve been calling on Miss Selkirk, and she has to know that it’d be a sound match.”

“It’d be a sound match for *you*, ye mean. What’s in it fer her? Livin’ in this hovel, cookin’ fer yer hands? Cookin’ fer *you* with yer picky ‘not enough beef’ attitude?” Ian stabbed his spoon towards his son with every sentence; bushy gray eyebrows drawn over the green eyes he’d passed on to Cam.

Cam would have normally chuckled and brushed off his father’s arguments, but this time he just sighed. Because he was beginning to wonder if maybe the old man was right. Serena Selkirk lived in a beautiful house, with an actual servant, and was... well, she was a lady. All she’d get out of marrying him was someone to help her run the ranch. He’d get a gorgeous new home, an exquisite young wife he loved... and twice as much responsibility, so half as much time to appreciate any of it.

But the real problem was that the longer he thought about it, the

more he questioned if he really *wanted* to marry Serena. He'd called on her three times since her birthday, and hadn't been particularly impressed with the connection they'd shared. Each meeting had been civil and pleasant and sociable, sharing a luncheon with Serena and her batty old aunts. But he got the impression that they were testing him, and finding him somehow lacking. Moreover, the conversations he'd had with Serena revealed that despite his long-held love for her, they weren't as compatible as he'd hoped.

He needed someone who would work beside him to make their ranch a success; she had no interest in cooking or housekeeping, and frowned at the thought of managing her own ranch, much less two. He was looking to start a family as soon as possible; she didn't want to think about having children for several years. He had quit school early; she was learned and liked to discuss things she'd read, which made him feel deficient. He was perfectly happy spending his life in relative solitude on the ranch; she wanted to experience the social whirl of the city. And he didn't think her aunts and his father could sit in the same room without insulting each other, much less *live* together.

Their basic differences were vast enough that he wasn't sure if they could overcome them. He'd pushed his luck, and kissed her again. She was a willing participant, but again, he'd been fairly underwhelmed. Just like that first kiss.

He had watched her grow from a porcelain-doll-girl into a delicate and pristine lady, but kissing Serena Selkirk just didn't arouse him. Maybe it was because she still looked like a doll to him; why, she barely came up to his chest!

And so he put down his spoon and ran his hand through his hair. "I know, Da. I know."

His father was a gruff man, hardened by years of poverty and hard work. Cam knew that the older man was proud of all of his children. But the two of them had shared a special bond since Ian left his Ontario home to stay with his youngest son. Now, Cam watched his father's eyes soften.

"She's a beautiful woman, Cameron. She reminds me of that doll we got yer sister Mary years ago. Perfect an' delicate. It's hard to imagine her livin' here." He gestured around the cabin. It was a single room, with two sections portioned off with curtains. Cam knew he'd have to make some changes if he ever hoped to bring a wife here, but he'd built it with his own hands, and was still proud of it. And he knew his father was comfortable here.

And he knew that Serena Selkirk would never be.

"I had to ask for her hand, Da. I love her!" His father scowled. "And I don't want to risk someone else getting control of the Double-S.

I had an agreement with Stanley, and Serena still lets us access Horse Creek if ours dries up. But I don't like relying on that goodwill. I want to control my future, and the only way to expand around here is to have control of the Double-S."

"Not through her, laddie. She's not right for you."

"I love her!"

"Nae, ye don't. Ye love the *idea* of her, of what she represents. A perfect wife. Ye haven't spent nearly enough time with her to love her. Ye saw her one day an' decided she'd be the woman ye loved, and that was it fer ye."

"What do you have against her? What's wrong with her? Or do you think there's something wrong with me?" The moment the words left his mouth, Cam regretted them. He understood his father's point of view, and knew that the older man loved him.

Still, there was a part of him that was relieved to watch Ian's face crumble in sadness. "Ye know I think ye're equal to any man that's lived, Cameron. Ye know I am proud of the life ye've made here. But she wouldn't be happy here, and ye wouldn't be happy with her. And I want ye to be happy, son."

Cam stared at his father for a long moment before turning back to his stew. His father claimed that he didn't really love Serena, and he was beginning to wonder if that was the truth. They had little in common, and she didn't stimulate him the way he'd assumed she would. It was hard to imagine that they could have a successful marriage.

He chewed a big bite of carrots and potatoes flavored with beef, and swallowed. The meal was a metaphor for his life; the basic necessities to survive, with just enough hints of comfort to make the whole thing worth living. "I know, Da." A sophisticated lady like Serena could never be happy living here with them. "I know."



*...do me the honor of joining me for dinner tomorrow evening?*

Oh Heavens! Serena's cheeks were warm again, and her hands shook slightly. The note in them was scripted in an elegant hand on the Inter-Ocean Hotel's stationery, and sounded like something straight out of New York society. She sighed, and pressed it to her chest.

"Well, what's it say?"

"Don't leave us guessing, young lady, what's it say?"

Serena, reluctant to part with it, held the invitation out to her aunts. "He wants us to have dinner with him tomorrow evening at his hotel."

“He? Who ‘he’? Which ‘he’?”

“What do you mean, ‘which he?’ You ignorant old woman, the same ‘he’ she’s been sighing over for days!”

“The teacher? So not Cam MacLeod?”

“Why would a cowboy like Cam MacLeod invite three eligible ladies to the finest establishment in Cheyenne? Use your brain for once, you ninny.”

Serena tried to interrupt her aunts’ bickering. “Actually, he’s invited Molly and Annie as well. He would like to get to know Annie a little better.”

“See?” Agatha turned to Agnes. “*Five* ladies!”

“Molly’s not eligible, and Annie’s too young for him.”

“And *you’re* too old for him.”

“I’m exactly one minute older than *you*, you fool.”

“Alright, *I’m* too old for him too. I think he’s inviting us all just to see our Serena again.”

“Well, of *course* he is.”

Both old ladies turned to Serena, their squabbling put aside in the face of a new, more interesting target. She caught her breath at the picture they presented. “You really think he wants to see me?” she whispered.

Agnes’—at least, Serena thought it was Agnes’—sharp gaze softened. “How could he not, dearie? You must be the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen.”

Serena scoffed. “Don’t be silly. Molly said that he comes from one of the wealthiest families in New York. He probably attends all of the balls and parties and knows hundreds of ladies more beautiful than I am. Someone as handsome as him...” she trailed off in a sigh.

Agatha primly stroked Calpurnia—of *course* the cats had traveled with them to the city—while peering over the invitation, and flippantly waved her objections away. “Annie told Molly that he could barely take his eyes off of you. And from the way you’ve been waltzing about with stars in your eyes for the last several days, I think there must be *some* sort of spark between you.” She held the stationary closer to the light; heedless of the way her casual words had made Serena’s heart leap. “My eyes aren’t as fresh as they used to be. Look at this.” She handed the invitation to her sister. “Have you ever seen such an elegant hand? I can’t recall seeing such a lovely invitation since we were girls in St. Louis, and that handsome Mr. Martin used to call on us...”

Agnes took the paper, but instead of looking at it, pressed it against her chest in a pose eerily similar to Serena’s. “Oh, yes...” she sighed.

Serena’s interest was piqued enough to ask, “A gentleman used to

call on you both? What happened?" This was one story she'd never heard before; an oddity with two aunts who loved to dredge up old grievances.

Agatha's gaze snapped back into focus, her mouth puckered into her usual frown. "What do you mean, what happened? He proposed, of course."

Serena's eyes widened. She'd never heard anything about this. Her aunts were notorious flirts and pranksters, though, and often used their identical appearances to trick friends and family. They looked so alike that even she had trouble telling them apart until they spoke, at which time she could recognize their mannerisms. Agatha tended to be bossier, while Agnes was flightier. Unfortunately, both sisters knew that, and could take on the other's mannerisms if they *really* wanted to cause confusion. Serena had heard stories from her father about the way his older sisters would switch places and make mischief.

"To *whom* did he propose?"

Her aunts glanced at each other, and Serena thought they each looked a little guilty. "To both of us, of course."

"You see..." Agnes had the grace to blush, "He didn't realize that there were two of us."

Serena gasped at the wickedness. "You *both* went stepping out with him? And he thought you were the same lady? Whatever did you do?"

Agatha's chin rose. "We very nearly gave him a heart-attack when we both appeared in the parlor one afternoon and told him that we couldn't marry him because we couldn't stand the thought of being separated."

Her sister giggled. "I shall never forget the look on his face. He made his excuses as fast as possible and we never saw him again."

"But he did have a lovely hand, didn't he?"

"Oh yes, he used to write the most romantic notes."

"Almost as romantic as this one." Agatha waved Mr. Carderock's invitation, and Serena quickly recalled the original topic.

"Do you really think he could be interested in seeing *me* again?"

"I do indeed, young lady. It sounds like you were quite taken with each other."

"And it's up to us to ensure nothing improper happens."

"What Agnes *means* is that she never passes up a chance to dine at the Inter-Ocean." Her sister stuck out her tongue.

"Mr. Carderock seems to be a perfect gentleman. It's hard to imagine that he would discuss anything other than Annie's schooling, as he mentioned in the invitation." Although, Serena was honest enough to admit, she wouldn't mind discussing all sorts of things with him. She'd found herself lying awake at night, wondering all about him. Was he really as refined as he appeared? Was he strong enough

to survive the harsh Cheyenne winters? Was it possible that he could be happy in their city, when he came from such elegance? And *why* was he here, if his family was as wealthy as she'd heard whispered? Why, Mrs. Davis had told Aunt Agatha that Mr. Carderock would be investing in Mr. Hay's new bank!

"Well, *I've* heard that Mr. Sebastian Carderock is most definitely *unmarried*." Agnes' sly expression proved that she was pleased to be imparting this new gossip. "He would be a fine match for our Serena, wouldn't he?"

Serena caught her breath at the thought. Her? *Married* to Mr. Carderock? Oh, Good Heavens! She placed her palms against her suddenly-warm cheeks.

"Agnes Marie! How *dare* you plant such ideas in dear Serena's head?"

"I'm Elizabeth, you old biddy. *Your* middle name is Marie."

Agatha sputtered, "Fine, Agnes *Elizabeth*. You mustn't raise Serena's hopes like that. Now she's going to be extra-nervous during tomorrow's dinner, trying to make a good impression."

"I was only saying what you were thinking," Agnes pouted.

"Well of course, but I didn't have the ill manners to *say* something, did I?" Aunt Agatha seemed to forget Serena was in the room, and if she hadn't been so distracted at the thought of being courted by Mr. Carderock—of being *kissed* by Mr. Carderock!—she would have thought it amusing. "Besides, sister, you *know* that Serena is half-enthralled with the gentleman already. He's devilishly handsome from what we saw, and very urbane. Marrying a man here in Cheyenne—especially if he were wealthy—would certainly solve her problems with the Double-S and Mr. MacLeod. I'm sure she's thinking all of this, but shame—*shame!*—on you for bringing it up and making such a fuss out of it!"

Agnes sputtered at her sister's accusations. "You're the one spouting off about things I'd never even considered. Of *course* she's going to be thinking about it now!"

"Aunt Agnes, Aunt Agatha!" Serena smiled and tried to distract them from their tiff. "I certainly have no intention of thinking *anything* other than what Mr. Carderock's invitation states. He would like to dine with all of us, to get to know Annie's family better. I'm flattered that he even included us, frankly." Her aunts exchanged glances, but Serena couldn't read them. "Besides," she flushed momentarily and looked down at her hands, "even if Mr. Carderock isn't married, that doesn't mean he's looking for a wife. *Please* don't do anything foolish."

"Why, whatever do you mean?" Serena wasn't fooled by Agnes' innocent demeanor.

"I *mean* that I *really* don't want you doing what you did to poor



Cam; going on about me making him a fine wife and whatnot. I felt like I was up for auction!”

Agatha waved her concerns away. “Don’t be silly, Serena. We only did that the first time. It’s become obvious that you and Cameron MacLeod simply do not suit, and would not be a good match. Mr. Sebastian Carderock *the third*, however...” The twins sighed in unison.

“There! You’re doing it!” Serena glared at her aunts. “You haven’t even met the man and you think that we’re suited. You have no idea. No one has any idea, much less me! He could... he could... I don’t know, he could be engaged already, or pick his teeth, or not like children, or only eat meat, or something else horrendous.”

Her aunts shared a look, and turned back to her. As one woman, they burst into laughter.

“Pick his teeth’...? Really? *That’s* your—”

“—Objection to him? A gentleman could be taught *not* to pick his teeth, Serena.”

She sighed, and rubbed her temples. “I just mean that we don’t know anything about him, so please *find out* more before you start advertising me to another man.”

Agatha smiled benevolently. “Serena, since your mother passed away, you’ve been like a daughter to us. We’ve done everything possible to ensure that you were raised with all of the grace and gentility our brother’s child deserves.”

Her sister took over, as she was wont to do. “We only want your happiness, and we have been working towards that—”

“—and will continue to work towards that—”

“Yes, thank you Agatha. *And will continue to work towards that* until we’re satisfied that you are happy.”

They really were dear women. She couldn’t ask for two more loving, devoted, and committed guardians as she looked to her future.

As Serena enveloped them both in a hug, however, she realized that they’d never actually promised that they wouldn’t interfere. On the contrary; they’d both just vowed that they’d continue to interfere until they were satisfied that she was happy.

Oh dear. Poor Mr. Carderock didn’t know what was about to hit him.

## CHAPTER FIVE



The Inter-Ocean Hotel was really quite elegant. It didn't have the same cachet as the Hoffman House in New York, or the size of the Hotel Imperial, but it was modern and stylish; three stories high with a canopy out front. As with the rest of Cheyenne, the hotel was a delightful surprise.

Sebastian had gotten another surprise when he met the owner and proprietor. Barney Ford was an older black gentleman with a thick gray mustache and a willingness to discuss the past. Sebastian discovered that his host had been born into slavery in Virginia, escaped well before the war via the Underground Railroad, and had opened hotels in Nicaragua, Denver and Cheyenne. He had shared several drinks with Sebastian the evening before, pleased to have a new set of ears for the stories of his various adventures. Sebastian found his tales fascinating and inspiring, to listen to everything the ex-slave had overcome.

Tonight, though, his mind was on other matters, as he nodded to Mr. Ford across the lobby. Tonight, he was going to see Serena again.

He'd thought about her often over the last days. If he were honest, he'd thought of little else, despite the meetings with Misters Hay, Carey and Whipple about the new bank. Miss Serena Selkirk just had a way of sticking with a man. He assumed it was those eyes, the most unusually beautiful shade of purple. But the rest of the package was memorable, too. He smiled and checked his pocket watch.

Right on time, a footman opened the doors to the foyer, and three women stepped through, chattering happily. They allowed the footman to accept their light wraps, and stepped into lobby. From where he stood, Sebastian could recognize Serena's pale countenance, and her two older companions must be her aunts. But where were Annie and her sister?

"Miss Selkirk," he crossed and, accepting her hand, bent over it. "You look exquisite this evening." It wasn't empty flattery. Her hair was pulled into a simple bun at the base of her neck, and Sebastian found himself pleased that she didn't attempt the ridiculously frizzy coiffures he'd seen in England and New York. She wore a lilac evening gown that draped elegantly over her small shoulders, falling just low

enough in the front to reveal the faintest swell of breasts. His gaze must have lingered a moment too long, because when he glanced back to her face, he caught the faintest tint of a blush on her high cheekbones. Her serenity and aloofness was belied by the way her pulse beat at the base of her neck; the silver necklace she wore only drew his gaze back to that vulnerable spot.

"Hello, Mr. Carderock." Her voice was just as soft and alluring as he'd remembered. She was a perfect lady, and it still amazed him to think of her running her father's ranch.

He smiled, and saw her eyes widen slightly. "Won't you introduce me to your sisters?"

Both older ladies tittered, and she smiled at his attempt at humor. "Of course. Mr. Carderock, these are my aunts, Miss Agatha Selkirk and Miss Agnes Selkirk." Both ladies twittered again in unison and bobbed two identically out-of-date curtsies, as if he were royalty.

"We're so pleased to finally meet you, Mr. Carderock!"

"The city is all abuzz about your arrival! We were just thrilled to receive your invitation!"

"We're so looking forward to hearing your plans for the students and Annie!"

Serena interrupted her aunts. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Carderock, but Annie was feeling poorly this afternoon. Molly thought it would be best for her to rest instead of joining us, and of course stayed with her. She has invited you to lunch whenever it's convenient, to discuss Annie's schooling. If you'd rather postpone this gathering until they can join us, I'm sure th—"

Sebastian cut in before she could suggest that she and her aunts go back home. "I am very much looking forward to meeting Mrs. Barker and seeing Annie again," He offered his arm to her, "but you can't honestly expect me to find *any* reason to cancel a dinner engagement with three of the loveliest ladies I've ever met?"

Ignoring her aunts' tittering—they laughed more than any other old ladies he'd known, and it seemed to make them younger somehow—Serena hesitantly placed one graceful hand on his forearm. It was a delicate touch, but it warmed his skin through his tuxedo jacket and shirt. He wondered how it would feel to touch more of her skin. He wondered what *she* would make him feel.

He offered his other arm to Miss Agnes, and led all three ladies into the dining room. It was richly appointed in reds and dark woods, but he could barely take his eyes from the pale vision beside him. The dinner was delicious, but he paid little attention to it. He was busy being utterly enchanted by his companion.

Serena was well-spoken, demure, witty, and polite. She had a delightful way of speaking her mind without making it seem forthright

that reminded him very much of his mother. He was fascinated to hear more about Serena's experiences running the Double-S cattle ranch, and her aunts were happy to sing her praises. Serena herself seemed uncomfortable, and she finally confessed—when pressed—that she didn't care for life on the ranch, and much preferred to experience Cheyenne's society. It seemed that she was a social creature, and didn't enjoy the loneliness of the ranch.

"Why don't you ladies live full-time in the city, then? It seems that you all prefer it here." He took a sip of the red wine Mr. Ford had chosen for him. It complimented the steak perfectly.

"Someone needs to manage the ranch, to make the decisions. Truthfully, I wish I could just sell it, to be rid of it."

Sebastian glanced at her aunts. "Can you do that? Just sell your father's ranch?"

Serena shrugged delicately, her attention not-too-convincingly on the roll beside her plate. "My father was a strong man. A distant man. I don't share whatever dreams caused him to build the Double-S. I manage it because my aunts and I need the income to live as we've become accustomed."

Agatha spoke up, "We've been trying to convince the silly girl that she needs to find a husband to manage it for her, so—"

"We are not, you absent-minded biddy! We *were* under that impression," Agnes smiled sweetly at Sebastian, "until we realized that our Serena has no interest in the ranch at all. *Now* we're focused on finding her a husband who will keep her here in the city, where she belongs."

Serena's eyes were firmly locked on the chandelier behind Sebastian, and she was biting her lower lip. He thought it might have been in embarrassment.

"I was *about* to say that, you old baggage!" The smile Agatha turned on Sebastian was identical to her sister's. "We've realized that what she needs is a husband who won't expect her to live on a ranch and manage a bunch of cowhands, but who will allow her to live the life she deserves, and do the sorts of things she likes to do."

In an effort to draw her back into the conversation, and spare her some embarrassment, Sebastian turned to Serena. "And what *do* you like to do, Miss Serena? How would you occupy yourself here in town, were you not committed to your ranch?"

The question seemed to surprise her, and she was hesitant when she replied. "Well... I suppose I hadn't really considered it. Before my father passed away, I was a silly girl, only interested in social functions. And reading." Her face lit up in another breathtaking smile. "Oh, I've always adored reading. It hasn't occurred to me to wonder how I could support myself here in Cheyenne, but..." She trailed off,

and glanced hesitantly at her aunts, who were peering expectantly at her. Sebastian had the impression that they'd never heard these confessions before either. "I suppose I'd like to share my love of books with others. Cheyenne doesn't have a library, but maybe I could..." He caught a flash of violet beneath her lowered lashes. She took a deep breath, and he forced his gaze not to drop to the expanse of pale skin above her bosom. "I greatly admire what you're doing, Mr. Carderock. You have such skills and knowledge, and sharing it with others—especially children like Annie!—seems to me to be the most noble of undertakings."

Sebastian was so stunned that he actually sat back in his chair. She thought him *noble*? For teaching? That was certainly a first. His family's society thought him at best an eccentric, and at worst a wastrel. Even in England, he'd never met anyone who considered the art of education to be a noble profession. But she'd articulated what he enjoyed about his career; he had the same skills as his father and brothers, but rather than use them to expand his wealth, he shared them with others.

Serena was emboldened by his silence. "My closest friend—Annie's sister Wendy—is the one who taught me to love books. She enjoys the classics, but I'll confess a weakness for adventure tales." Her grin was impish, unapologetic, and he was lost in it. "Wendy went to teach in St. Louis, but left her position to become a private governess for a family with a deaf child. She's been using special techniques to teach him, and before I met you, I thought that she was alone in her endeavors. But you...! Mr. Carderock, I..." she trailed off, and Sebastian found himself arrested by two deep pools of clear violet. Without thinking, he placed his hand near hers on the table, and in her excitement, she grabbed it. The jolt was sudden and beautiful and made him warm all over. He smiled slowly and turned his hand over, to squeeze hers. Her eyes went wide and she gasped slightly, but didn't look away.

Her breathing was shallow, but Sebastian wouldn't allow her to disengage. "I think..." she took a deep breath, "I think that your profession, Mr. Carderock, must be very interesting and enriching."

"Please, Miss Serena. I would be honored if you called me Sebastian." Her blush was immediate and endearing, and she glanced away quickly. To lessen her discomfort, Sebastian turned smoothly to her aunts—who had been watching as intently as any tennis spectators—and said, "If you would all call me Sebastian? I feel that we've become fast friends," he squeezed her hand once more, "to allow the liberty."

Instead of tittering childishly like they had earlier, the two women smiled hugely at one another, and then turned to him and said in

unison, "We would be pleased to, Sebastian."

"And you, Miss Serena?" He squeezed her hand again, and drew her gaze once more.

"Of course, Sebastian." Her whisper was the barest breath, but sensual all the same. His pulse leapt to hear it, and he found himself leaning towards her.

"Well, a teacher? I never considered that." Agatha interrupted their shared moment. "But it's a lovely idea."

"Oh yes!" Her sister chimed in. "In all of those romances, the impoverished heroine takes a job as a governess, remember?"

Agatha nodded, "It's a perfectly respectable job for a lady. It might not actually support her in the manner to which she's become accustomed..."

"But *two* teachers' salaries would, I think." Both ladies smirked a bit and sent him sidelong glances, which Sebastian pretended not to see.

"Besides," Agatha continued, "If she sold the Double-S, she could live comfortably, and—"

"And it would allow her to stay in the city, to continue her other pursuits!"

In order to forestall Agatha's irritation at her sister's interruptions, Sebastian drew Serena into the conversation. "Other pursuits, Miss Serena?"

Her voice was still a little breathless when she replied, "I often join my aunts in their charitable projects and social committees." He wondered if it was their joined hands that made her so uneasy. Sebastian rubbed his thumb over the smooth skin on the back of her hand, and was rewarded with a slight shudder across her delicate shoulders. Hiding his smile, he released her hand and sat back. She hurried to draw her hands back into her lap.

Picking up his goblet, Sebastian took a sip of wine and smiled charmingly at her. Instead of blushing, he was intrigued by the way she met his gaze and smiled hesitantly back at him. He admired the way she seemed to embody genteelness and spirit at once, and wanted to discover all of her secrets, to find out what made her like this. She was the most intriguing woman he'd ever met, living in the most intriguing city he'd ever seen.

He was pretty certain that he was falling hard for Miss Serena Selkirk... and he'd only met her twice. And he couldn't deny that he'd already fallen for Cheyenne, this astonishingly modern metropolis in the middle of the Wyoming emptiness.

"Tell me about these projects and committees. I should know all of the best ones, if I'm going to be living in Cheyenne."

Her face lit up with another one of those brilliant smiles. "It would

be wonderful if you stayed, Mr. Co—I mean, *Sebastian*. Cheyenne is the most delightful city, and we'd be so lucky to count you as a citizen." Her flattery made her blush slightly again, but she met his gaze.

He fell into those violet eyes. "I am finding many intriguing reasons to stay, Miss Serena," he murmured. Her cheeks turned pinker.

Agatha cleared her throat, and he turned an innocent expression towards the older woman. He knew he was flirting shamelessly with Serena, but she was such a delight that he couldn't make himself stop. And while her aunts were allegedly there as her chaperones, he suspected that they would be perfectly content with his courting of their niece. He'd ask them formally, of course, but the fact that they'd made no objections so far to his flirting—and in fact stated that they were looking for a man like him to woo her—made him suspect that they were firmly in his court.

"We are involved in several women's organizations, mostly through the churches. I suspect that you would be happiest joining the Cheyenne Gentleman's Club down the street."

He lifted his glass towards Agatha. "I've dined there, and was impressed. Perhaps I *will* investigate membership." The two older ladies shared a satisfied glance, and Sebastian knew that the comment had been a way to find out how much he was worth. A man surviving on a school-teacher's salary wouldn't be able to afford membership... but he'd been raised in luxury, surrounded by businessmen, and saw no reason to deny himself familiarity like that just because he wasn't in New York anymore.

"Of course," Agnes spoke up, "Most of the organizations cooperate several times a year for big events or festivals."

"Oh yes!" her sister interrupted, "and the Independence Day celebration next week is sure to be a memorable one."

Sebastian turned to Serena. "Tell me about it."

He was gratified to see her face light up in excitement. "Oh, Sebastian, it's the best part of summer! We have a grand parade and a bonfire and fireworks!"

"Really?" He was continually surprised by Cheyenne's sophistication.

"This year I'm helping to organize—"

"Doing most of the work, she means!" Agatha interrupted.

"—the children's games and contests." Serena ignored her aunt's interruption. "I love to see how proud the winners are, with their sweet little faces. But all the ladies have been working hard on the celebration this year. We're lucky we got here in time to help."

"Don't forget the best part..." Agnes said, and then finished in

unison with her twin, “the picnic!”

Agatha continued, “The food is always delicious—everyone brings her specialty—and we barbeque whole hogs and more beef than you can imagine.” She sighed happily.

“And,” Agnes was glaring at her sister, as if blaming her for forgetting something, “There’s the charitable fund-raisers like *the basket auction*.”

“Oh yes, *thank you* for reminding me.” Agatha glared back, and Sebastian felt the table jump, as if someone had kicked someone else’s shin. But both sisters turned angelic smiles towards him.

“You see, the eligible young ladies of the city make up baskets filled with all sorts of homemade goodies and savories. Serena’s is bound to be very popular.”

“The bidding is fierce.”

“Would you be interested in bidding on her basket, Sebastian?”

“It’s traditional that the man who wins the basket has the honor of the young lady’s company at the barbeque and bonfire.”

“And any time after that. Bidding on a basket indicates *interest* in the young lady, if you catch our meaning.”

“Are you partial to blueberry jam? Serena makes delicious jam, and there will be two jars of it in her basket.”

Sebastian could barely hide his smile at the way her aunts seemed to be able to think in unison. He glanced at Serena. Her skin was awash in pink, and she actually had one delicate hand resting over her eyes, as if she was so embarrassed she couldn’t stand to watch any longer.

He allowed himself a small smile then, and leaned in closer to her. “It happens that blueberry jam is my favorite flavor, Miss Serena.” He saw a flash of violet as she peeked between her fingers, “But I’ll be bidding on your basket for an entirely different prize.” She dropped her hand, and he reached across to take it. “The pleasure of your company would be worth any price.”

Her perfect little bow-shaped lips formed a perfect little “Oh”, and his smile stretched from cheek to cheek. She really was stunning.

The rest of the meal was delicious, but Sebastian wasn’t really paying attention. He was utterly enthralled by Serena Selkirk, and by the time he escorted them to the curb and lifted her into the waiting carriage, Sebastian was willing to admit that he was smitten.

Getting ready for bed that evening, he thought about all the efforts his mother had made over the last year to get him to marry, and how resistant he’d been to the idea. It wasn’t marriage itself that deterred him, but the lack of interesting partners. But within days of arriving in this new and exciting city, he found a lady he was seriously considering courting.



Serena Selkirk was everything he—and his mother—could ever want in a bride. She was beautiful, yes, but it was more than that. She had an inner strength he'd seen when she spoke of the ranch, and a kindness and compassion that had come out when speaking about her fellow Cheyenne citizens. And patience to live with her two bickering aunts. And a passion for helping others that manifested as a desire to teach students like Annie.

Yep, Sebastian was smitten.

He was lying in bed, his hands stacked behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His family fully expected him to return to New York in a year, to join them at the reins of Carderock Investments. But Cheyenne was in his blood now, and he was *excited* to call this place his new home. And Serena Selkirk was certainly a compelling reason to stay right here.

He had a luncheon date with her family planned for later in the week, and he already was looking forward to seeing her again. It would be nice to meet Mrs. Barker, and get to know Annie a little better; but it didn't take much honesty to admit that it was Serena he wanted to see.

He wanted to see a *lot* more of her. Sebastian grinned in the dark. He wanted to see *all* of her; she really was exquisite. Her touches made him warm, and the sight of all that pale skin this evening had been... *overwhelming* to his senses.

Oh yes, Sebastian wanted to see more of her, and he was beginning to think that he wanted it enough to go about it properly. He was going to have to court Miss Serena Selkirk, and then marry her, and then spend the rest of his life enjoying her.

## CHAPTER SIX



Molly started cooking immediately after helping Brixley clear the breakfast dishes. She knew that the older man, who'd grown up in slavery and still maintained the staid 'old family retainer' air, appreciated her help. He'd been with the elder Misses Selkirks for years, and they'd all adjusted to each other's habits and preferences. But it had to be an imposition, to suddenly expect him to cook for four additional mouths, so Molly and Annie always did their best to help around the house when they visited. And as good a cook as he was, he was always happy to step aside in the kitchen and let her prepare meals—and desserts—provided he got a generous helping himself.

She was determined to impress Mr. Carderock today. Agnes and Agatha had been pleased to tell all that happened at the dinner a few nights ago, so Molly knew that their guest really *was* as cultured as the rumors claimed, and would be used to fine fare. Now that Annie was feeling well enough to receive visitors—summer colds were the absolute worst!—Molly could pour her creative energies into preparing a luncheon feast that Mr. Carderock would appreciate. To that end, she'd splurged a little at the butcher's and market, rather than using items from their store. The glazed pork loin with apples would go well with the tartness of the braised Brussels sprouts. There would be a big bowl of summer berries with sugar sprinkles, and her fluffy butter rolls as well. And for dessert, she already had chocolate custard cooling for a special pie.

It had been raining steadily for several days, but with today being a special occasion, Molly had flat-out refused to allow her sons to go outside to "play in the puddles". They were used to playing together, but here in Cheyenne there were all sorts of exciting new ways to get into trouble, and plenty of neighborhood boys to help them along. It could be exhausting being the mother of two boys, but she loved the little dirt-devils fiercely. Sometimes the difficulties of motherhood would fairly overwhelm her, and she'd want to sit at the kitchen table and cry. And then again sometimes she'd remember that her youngest was three, and long for another tiny baby to cuddle. In fact, she hadn't even mentioned it to Ash yet, but she suspected that she might be pregnant again. Only time would tell, and since she was blessed with

easy pregnancies anyway, there was nothing to keep her from doing the things she loved.

Thanks to Annie and Serena, Molly didn't have to worry about being a mother today, and was reveling in the chance to focus entirely on her cooking. Her sister and friend had volunteered to watch the boys, but truthfully, Serena was fairly distracted. It had been amusing to see the way she'd fallen for Mr. Carderock, without even realizing it. Molly was pretty sure the young woman wasn't aware of the excited smiles or dreamy sighs she'd let slip whenever their new schoolteacher's name was mentioned. Having two younger sisters herself, Molly would have been concerned that Serena was moving too quickly, and didn't understand the follies of young love. But Mr. Carderock *did* seem to be everything the young woman had ever wanted in a husband, unlike Cam. She knew that their poor neighbor had imagined himself in love with Serena for years, but the two young people had little in common. Mr. Carderock, on the other hand, appeared to be a match for all of the young lady's wistful imaginings, and to hear Agatha and Agnes tell it, he had honorable intentions. Still, Molly was determined to make her own decision about Mr. Carderock's objectives.

She had finished tidying up the kitchen, and hurried upstairs to change into her Sunday dress when she heard the knock at the front door, and the low hum of Brixley's voice as he admitted the caller. Molly rushed through her toilette, and said a quick prayer than the boys hadn't dirtied their trousers too much while she'd been cooking. She'd instructed Annie to keep them in the parlor playing games, but Pete always managed to skin his knee somehow.

Sure enough, her older son was looking decidedly disheveled when she joined the rest of the household in the parlor. She gave him a good glare, but decided not to make him change. The damage had been done, and she had a relaxed view of the level of clean little boys could maintain. Instead, she turned her attention to their caller.

Mr. Sebastian Carderock stood eye-to-eye with her, making him taller than many men, but nowhere near as tall as her Ash, or Cam. His chocolate-brown hair was swept back with pomade, and he appeared quite dapper and fashionable; the ideal gentleman. The twinkle in his dark eyes as he bent over her hand made her feel quite flustered, which was a ridiculous way to feel when one was close to thirty, and a wife and mother. It wasn't until they sat down to luncheon that she took stock of the others' reactions to Sebastian. No matter their age or worldliness, all five females in that room were hanging on his every word. He was a charmer, alright.

He spoke clearly and calmly to Annie, and the girl fairly glowed from the attention. Molly and the family had been working with her

for a few months, encouraging her to vocalize while communicating. While she was clearer now than she had been when they'd first started corresponding with Sebastian, she was positively blossoming here before him. She wasn't speaking everything, and she often grew frustrated and lapsed into sign, which Serena or Molly—or even Pete—spoke for her, but she was so much more confident and capable than she was even last month. Sebastian's calm expectations and attentive gaze made the girl *want* to please him, Molly could tell. He'd be a good teacher for her, and she'd already spoken to Agatha and Agnes about letting the girl stay in their home during the week, providing Molly could arrange some sort of supervision. She'd miss her sister always being around, but it was amazing to think that she'd be able to attend a public school like every other child her age in Cheyenne. In fact, if someone had mentioned it to Molly a few years ago, she would have said it was wishful thinking. It was really thanks to a teacher like Sebastian, who was not only willing to work with students who needed extra attention, but who was kind and considerate and charming, that Annie would be able to become a real student.

Agnes—or perhaps it had been Agatha—had told Molly of Serena's confession about wanting to teach, and Molly hadn't been surprised once she considered it. She remembered the way young Serena had always seemed happiest when she'd been devouring the adventure and romance stories Wendy would share with her, and it made sense that she wanted to share some of those with others. She was patient and calm when she taught Annie or Pete, gently correcting or guiding. She was a wonderfully sweet young woman, kind and generous; she was always trying to better the world around her, through her charity works and gentle instruction. She'd make a fine educator. Wendy herself had left home to be a teacher, and while Serena had been tied to the ranch, the time was coming when she'd have to make a decision about the Double-S and what to do with it.

Selling the property had always been an option, but it wasn't likely that a buyer would stroll into town and want to pick up cattle ranching. Serena would have better luck selling to one of the owners of the surrounding ranches, but Molly knew that the property lines meant that Cam MacLeod was really the only owner who would find the Double-S valuable. And she knew that young man wanted the property, very much. In fact, Molly had suspected that despite Cam's claims of tenderness for Serena, what he really desired was her ranch. Unfortunately, there was no way he'd be able to offer Serena a fair price for the Double-S; he'd mentioned to Ash recently that while the Open Skye was finally making a profit, he didn't have enough to expand the property.

So for now, Serena was stuck with the Double-S, despite her long-held desire to stay here in the city and enjoy the benefits of society and civilization. She'd never be happy, as Molly was, to live hours from her friends, to spend all day in back-breaking labor with only her husband and family for companionship. Molly had known the young woman for years, and had seen how she blossomed in the city, and seemed to... well, to wilt in the stifling tediousness of the Double-S. Serena wanted to live here in Cheyenne, and Molly had spent the last two years a little worried about what would happen to her young friend if that dream was denied her.

Of course, she only had to look at Serena today to know that her friend had a new and different dream: Mr. Sebastian Carderock. This was only the third time they'd met one another, but Molly knew that Serena had spent the last week sighing over the man. And rightfully so; he really was a dream. More importantly, to Molly at least, was that he seemed just as enthralled with Serena as she was with him. He was attentive and polite to all of the ladies, but Molly watched the way his eyes were constantly seeking out Serena's face. When she smiled—even if she wasn't speaking to him—Sebastian smiled. He seemed to always be aware of where she was and what she was doing. He actually cut himself off in mid-sentence once, while speaking to one of Serena's aunts, just to watch her laugh at something Pete had said to her. Molly thought that Sebastian's rueful grin and apology were charming, and she was happy to see him so enthralled with Serena. She wondered if the younger woman realized that she had accidentally bewitched her ideal gentleman.

After luncheon, she sent her sons upstairs to get cleaned up, and Annie offered to help Noah. Molly surreptitiously signed "Take your time" with a glance toward Serena, and her youngest sister winked and nodded, shooing her nephews up the stairs ahead of her. Molly offered to help Brixley clean up the dining room, but Agnes—or possibly Agatha—insisted she keep "the lovebirds" company in the parlor.

"We," she glared at her twin, "are going upstairs as well. We promised Serena that we would give her some space."

"But we didn't promise not to listen at the door!"

"Upstairs. Now."

Agatha—or maybe Agnes—scowled, but retreated with good grace. Molly grinned, and took her time making her way down the hall and into the parlor, making sure to stomp her feet a bit louder than necessary.

Still, when she entered, Serena and Sebastian were standing altogether too close for casual conversation. In fact, he was holding her hand, and Molly could see his thumb making little circles on her

friend's skin, the way Ash sometimes did. Serena was staring up adoringly into his eyes; she was shorter than him, of course, but he didn't tower her over her the way Cam—or Ash or Stan Selkirk—did. They really were a striking couple. Him, the proper and sophisticated gentleman; her, the delicate and perfect lady. Him, dark and worldly; her, pale and porcelain. Opposites, and yet each so flawless it was hard to imagine that they were real. To someone like Molly, who'd always thought of herself as completely ordinary-looking, the couple's absolute perfection was worthy of a little eye-roll.

Molly had to smile, thinking that they looked like a painting from the cover of one of Wendy's sigh-worthy dime novel romances. All that was missing was a fan and a few plinths, and this could be a scene out of an English ballroom.

So she was still smiling when she cleared her throat, and watched the two of them start guiltily, and step apart. Molly waved her hand dismissively. "No need for embarrassment. Agnes and Agatha sent me along as a chaperone, but if you want, I can go back to the kitchen and wash some dishes for five more minutes."

Serena's blush faded as she smiled at the joke, and Sebastian looked relieved to know that Molly wasn't intent on her chaperone duties. "No, you're welcome to join us, Molly."

"Are you sure? You didn't look like you'd gotten around to kissing her yet."

"Molly!" Serena's gasp wasn't quite as horrified as it *should* be, and Molly knew her friend trusted her judgment.

"I'm sure you'll find life here in Cheyenne a little different from England, Sebastian. For one thing, we move quicker. If we see something that we like, we have to snatch it up before someone else steals it. I trust you take my meaning?"

One perfectly dark brow rose, and his lip pulled up just far enough to reveal that dimple. "I understand you perfectly, Molly. I see that I'll have to get used to plain speaking, as well."

Molly laughed. "Well, I've never been accused of being a lady. I speak my mind, but so do many out here. Serena, for instance, has been managing a *ranch* for a year. Can you imagine one of your New York society ladies doing something as plain-speaking as *that*?"

His gaze was pensively approving as he took in Serena's blush and bright eyes. "I can't. I can't imagine any woman I've ever met holding a candle to Miss Selkirk. She's a remarkable woman," he turned back to Molly, pretending to ignore the little "oh" of amazement Serena had uttered, "And while I haven't yet had the opportunity to kiss her, I intend to remedy that as soon as possible."

Serena sunk onto the divan then, and Molly thought that she looked like she'd forgotten to breathe. Molly regarded the tall

gentleman in front of her. She no longer had any doubts about his intentions. Sebastian Carderock was a good man, and would make Serena a good husband. He was everything she could have hoped for her young friend. Molly nodded slowly. "You'd have my approval, sir," meaning both for the kiss, and for his courting. Sebastian smiled, and Molly could tell that he understood.

Serena was looking too dazed to start any polite conversation, and Molly wasn't in the mood for dithering anyhow. She wanted some answers from Sebastian, before everyone else came back. She employed more of that plain-speaking he'd commented on. "What are your plans for the future, Sebastian? Are you going to move back to New York?"

He actually crossed to the divan, and sat beside Serena. Molly had to smile at the way he took the young woman's hand, and laced their fingers together. He was showing her where his loyalty lay, and she nodded approvingly.

"I had intended to, Molly. I came to Cheyenne thinking it would only be for a year. But I'm falling in love..." he glanced at Serena, who'd suddenly gone quite pale, "with this city." Did Serena start breathing again? "Cheyenne is such an exciting place to be, and I'd like to be here to see it reach its potential. To help it. That's why I've agreed to invest in various enterprises. Not to mention my job at the school; I can't think of a better way to ensure that this city becomes a metropolis than to do my best to educate its future citizens." Sebastian glanced down at the small fingers entwined with his, and Molly thought she saw a flush rise on his cheeks. "I was already interested in staying in Cheyenne for longer than just a year, when I met an even better reason to stay." He squeezed Serena's hand. "I thought I'd wait until after the Independence Day celebrations, and then start looking for suitable housing."

Serena spoke up, having regained her color. "Most businessmen build their homes. The fashionable address is Millionaire's Row, of course, but 17<sup>th</sup> Street is so busy these days. I like our little house and location, here."

Molly was reminded of the differences in their lifestyles again. She'd always considered the Selkirk's Cheyenne home to be a mansion; tall and stately, it had four bedrooms and a small suite for Brixley on the third floor, a gorgeous dining room and fully-modern kitchen, and a private *and* a public parlor on either side of the grand foyer. There was even a front yard with a beautiful flower plot, and a fenced back yard that served no purpose, without livestock to raise. But compared to some of the homes on Millionaire's Row, this house really was quaint.

Sebastian must have also been used to much grander homes, but

his small grin was encouraging. "I think you have a lovely home here, and I would be quite comfortable in something similar. I think the location is ideal."

Molly wasn't about to stop grilling him; she wanted to make sure he was the one for Serena. "Yes, I've often thought this would be a lovely house in which to raise children. The yards are so much fun for little boys, and the street is nice and quiet. Have you considered children, Sebastian?" It was more plain-speaking, but a serious question. Molly knew that Serena didn't want children right away. She was still young enough that it needn't be a hurry, and she wanted to enjoy society here in the city before tying herself down with children. It was yet another reason why Molly and Ash didn't think that Cam was a good match for her; the rancher wanted children as soon as possible.

Sebastian took a deep breath, and turned his attention to Serena. "I enjoy teaching, and I often become quite close to some of my pupils. I like to think that I am a good role model for them..." He seemed to lose his train of thought when his companion placed her free hand on top of their joined ones. He looked down, and Molly thought he looked a little flustered.

"But?" Serena's voice was barely a whisper, and she leaned a little closer to Sebastian.

"But I don't think I'm quite ready for a family yet. I want children, but I'd like two or three years to get to know my wife, to enjoy her company." His voice had dropped low enough that Molly, seating on the sofa on the other side of the room, could barely hear it. He leaned towards Serena, until their faces—and their lips—were only inches apart.

"I agree completely." Serena really was whispering now. "There's no need to start a family right away in today's modern age. It's an out—"

"—dated ideal, exactly. Practically medieval."

"Exactly. Husbands and wives should have the time to enjoy each other."

"Exactly."

They were each only interested in the other, their lips a breath apart. Molly felt like an interloper, spying on them, and wanted to close her eyes. Truthfully, she wanted to find an excuse to leave the room, but knew that Agnes and Agatha wouldn't approve. So she settled for a discrete cough, and then another one a bit louder when they seemed not to hear. Serena blinked, and they both turned identically dazed gazes towards her. Molly pressed her lips together to keep from laughing at their expressions. They both looked like they were in their own little world, and disapproved of her interloping.



And so she stood up, and was moving towards the door, intent on giving them a few moments alone, when what sounded like a herd of elephants thundered down the front stairs. Having learned from experience, she quickly pulled the door open just as her sons barreled through the opening. Annie followed a moment later, looking frazzled and apologetic. Molly smiled at her sister, but turned to Serena—Sebastian had been distracted by a question from Pete—and mouthed “I’m sorry.” Serena smiled understandingly, and scooted a little farther from the man beside her, for propriety.

Then Molly heard Agnes and Agatha bickering as they came down the hall, and Molly sighed. She caught Serena’s eye again, and knew that the young woman wasn’t going to get the chance to kiss Sebastian today after all.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



Reverend Davis's annual Fourth of July sermon was usually on the merits of charitable actions, but this year it had a more patriotic theme. President Garfield had been shot yesterday, and the entire congregation was praying for his recovery. The preacher, who was a staunch advocate of statehood, was using the event—and the holiday—to try to rally his audience to his point of view. At this moment, he was guessing at how long it would take Wyoming to become a state, based on their current representation.

Despite her agreement with the Reverend—Serena always voted for statehood, believing they deserved representation in Washington—she was having a hard time concentrating on his words. She was sitting in her family's usual pew, squeezed between Aunt Agatha—*perhaps*—and Annie, who was following along with the written copy of the sermon that the dear Reverend always wrote up especially for her. Little Noah was sitting on Serena's lap, with his head tilted back against her shoulder. Although she couldn't see his face, she suspected that he'd been lulled into a doze by the warm, thick air in the church, and the Reverend's words. After three days of constant rain, the deluge had eased overnight, and the humidity seemed to wrap itself around the churchgoers. The ground in front of the walkway had been turned to mud, but it would almost certainly dry before tomorrow's festivities. For now, though, the moisture clung in the air thick enough to lull even the best-meaning lad into a doze.

Serena wasn't paying attention because she was sleepy, however. No, she was busy thinking about Mr. Sebastian Carderock the third. She wondered if he was at the service today. The Selkirk pew was towards the front of the church, so he could very well be sitting behind her. She just hadn't worked up enough courage to turn around to look. What if he wasn't there? What if he'd decided to join a different church, or just didn't want to see her again? And what if he *was* there, and gave her another one of those heart-melting smiles that flashed his dimple? She didn't quite sigh, but spent a pleasant moment thinking about that dimple, and the way his smiles made her feel. Sort of nervous, but excited too. And very warm.

After that almost-kiss in her aunts' front parlor, Sebastian had

entertained them with stories of the places and events he'd seen. He'd told them all about his family in New York, and his desire to make a difference in the world, and his years teaching at Eton. All of them had been utterly enthralled by his descriptions of fashionable New York society, and his family's place in it. He was so strikingly handsome, such a perfect gentleman, that it was easy to imagine him as some sort of nobleman.

He'd done a wonderful job of interacting with Annie, despite not using sign; by the end of the meal, Annie had been much more confident in using her speech, although she still signed most of her statements as well. Serena couldn't believe the change she saw happening to the girl, all thanks to a breath-taking smile from a handsome teacher. And Sebastian had been a dream come true for Noah and Pete; he had been willing to spend a half-hour behind her aunts' home teaching them the basics of baseball, and they'd followed him around in hero-worship for the rest of the day. Oh yes, he was a prince among men.

But most of all, Serena admired him for the fact that he'd come from wealth, but wanted to use his God-given talents to help others, by teaching. It seemed so noble, so honorable. Like something a knight of the Round Table would have done. She smiled and rested her cheek against Noah's hair, thinking of the tale by Sir Thomas Malory that Wendy had lent to her all those years ago. It was one of her favorites, because of the allure of the sophistication and gallantry of the knights. She was a realist, and knew that she wasn't going to be swept off of her feet by a knight in shining armor... but that didn't mean that she couldn't appreciate the chivalry of a wealthy man working towards the betterment of his fellow citizens. It was what she admired most about Sebastian.

She sighed then. Who was she kidding? She admired everything about the man. He was refined and polite and learned, unlike most of Wyoming Territory's eligible bachelors. And unlike the excess of cowboys around Cheyenne, Sebastian Carderock was smooth and spotless and mild. He didn't tower over her; he didn't make her feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed. She wasn't afraid that he might unintentionally hurt her, which was her secret fear around rough men like her father or Cam. It was impossible to imagine him being happy stuck in the middle of nowhere running a cattle ranch, and he didn't expect a woman to shoe a horse or scrub a floor or cook for a dozen hands.

Serena shifted uncomfortably. Of course, Molly could do all of those things—cook and clean and survive in the harsh Wyoming nothingness—and Serena had never thought any less of her friend. Molly and Annie seemed perfectly content to keep house; and while

Ash was large and rough and brusque, he was also kind and gentle to his loved ones. In fact, he was the first man to teach her that not all coarse and overpowering men were as callous as her father had been.

But despite the lessons the Barkers and the Murrays had taught her, Serena knew that she didn't belong on a ranch; she wanted a life in Cheyenne. That was what had held her back during the last month of Cam MacLeod's courting, despite knowing that he would probably make a good husband. She wanted to live in the city, and was beginning to wonder if she *could* sell the Double-S and make enough money teaching to support her and her aunts.

But then again, if she were to *marry* a city man, perhaps one recently arrived who admitted to being captivated by Cheyenne as much as she was.... Maybe they could live their Happily Ever After here in the city, just like the heroines in all of the dime novels.

She scoffed at her foolishness, and wished she could talk things over with Wendy. Her friend might not have all the answers, but she'd listen and give good advice. Wendy probably hadn't even received her last letter yet, but Serena vowed to pour all of her confusion and frustration and excitement into a letter that evening, and hope her friend had some insight she'd missed.

Feeling a little better, Serena did her best to focus on Reverend Davis' comparison of a central government to the benevolent hand of God. It was a little hard to follow, but the dear man was obviously agitated by the assassination attempt on the president. It might have been a hot topic of conversation back east, but here in Cheyenne, where they weren't even a state yet, tomorrow's celebration and picnic were far more interesting discussion points. Right before they all joined together in song, Serena remembered the conversation at dinner about the Fourth celebration. Sebastian said that he would bid on her basket! She felt her stomach flip-flop, and wondered if she'd actually be lucky enough to spend the picnic with such an admirable escort.

She raised her voice and joined in with the congregation, and if it was a bit more joyous than warranted, she felt that God would understand.



Cam fiddled nervously with his hat, waiting for the crush of people to exit the church. He'd come in late, and had to sit in the very back pew by the door, but knew exactly where she'd be. Despite her being so much shorter than everyone between them, he'd had no trouble picking out the pale halo of her hair. He spent as much time watching her—thinking about her—as he did listening to Reverend Davis,

despite the topic of the sermon. Truth be told, he really only ever came to church to see her.

Today was special, though. Today was July third. He'd gotten up before dawn to take care of his morning chores, and then rode like the blazes to make it into town before the service started. He'd tried again to get his father to go with him, to stay in town overnight for the big celebration, but the old man'd turned him down grumpily. He wasn't much for church or crowds, and so hadn't celebrated Independence Day since coming to Wyoming from Ontario. "Scotland an' Canada still bow to the queen," he'd grumble. "Why should I celebrate some other country's independence from her?"

It was a shame, because Da would have enjoyed all the delicious foods the womenfolk always whipped up. But there were so many people—thousands and thousands—as people poured in from all over the Territory. Cheyenne had the biggest Fourth of July celebration north of Salt Lake, and everyone knew it. Da would have hated the press of people, the crowds, and the inability to find any peace. Cam hated it too, much preferring the wide open spaces of his own land, but he could stand visiting the city when it was needed. The allure of all those treats at the barbeque—and the possibility of Miss Serena Selkirk's company—made dealing with the crowds worthwhile.

Cam was planning on using the rest of the day to visit Bullard's Dry Goods and Meanea's Saddle Shop over on 17<sup>th</sup>. He needed a new set of chaps, and to restock some basic supplies. But he was hoping that he'd be able to spend some time with Serena. He knew that Molly Barker and her family were staying with the Selkirks, but the promise of her cooking was only half the allure. He wanted an opportunity to court the woman he loved more privately, before having to announce his intentions publicly tomorrow in the basket auction.

He was nervous, and couldn't help shifting his weight around. He'd seen her aunts join a group of their friends under one of the trees, and Molly and Annie were trying to keep track of the boys while chatting with two other mothers. And then *she* strolled out of the church, a slightly distracted expression that turned into a smile when she saw him. Her smiles never failed to make him feel ten feet tall, and he poured all of his devotion into his return grin.

"Cam MacLeod! I was wondering if you'd be able to make it to the celebrations. Is your father with you?" Serena peered behind him, but Cam couldn't tell if it was because she was genuinely curious, or a little concerned that he'd brought the old grump along.

"Nah, he said someone has to make sure that the cattle don't wander off while me and the boys are in town." He gripped his hat in both hands. "You sure look pretty today, Serena." She smiled politely, and he could sense her attention drifting away, so he quickly grasped

a topic. "Are you looking forward to tomorrow's picnic?" He inwardly winced at the question. Of *course* she'd be excited about it.

Sure enough, her interest now seemed only polite, somehow, rather than the frank attention she'd shown him at her ranch. He began to panic as he wondered if he'd been judged and found lacking somehow. "Of course. The barbeque is always delicious, but the bonfire is my favorite part. I love the singing and dancing and fireworks."

He cleared his throat. "I'm hoping you'd be willing to share a dance with me, Serena." Her cheeks pinked and she lowered her gaze. *Aha*, a candid reaction! "I plan on bidding on the basket you're going to enter in the auction." *There!* He'd said it.

"That would be very nice, Cam."

His brows drew in slightly at her noncommittal response to his declaration, but he didn't have much time to dwell on it, because at that moment her face lit up in one of her stunning, genuine smiles.

His heart leapt.

And then he realized that she was staring beyond his left shoulder, and it sunk again. "Oh, Mr. Carderock! I was hoping—I mean, it's very nice to see you again, sir."

"Miss Serena, I wouldn't miss the chance of your company for anything." Cam had to watch the newcomer—a lithe dandy of a man with a citified accent and an actual suit—bend over Serena's hand like they were at a ball or something. She blushed prettily and smiled up at Cam's new rival.

Cam cleared his throat meaningfully, and Serena started. "Oh, excuse me! Cam, this is Sebastian Carderock the third, from New York. He's come to Cheyenne to teach math at the Central School, and Annie is going to be one of his students. Sebastian, this is Cam MacLeod, who owns the ranch next to the Double-S. We've known him for years, and he's practically family."

He could see Carderock's shoulders relax when Serena called him family. Why would she say that? Cam was *courting* her. But calling him family made him seem like a brother or cousin, and Cam knew that if this newcomer was interested in courting her as well, then she'd just effectively told him that Cam wasn't a threat.

And so his grip was just a little more crushing than it might otherwise have been when the two shook hands. But Sebastian Carderock—the *third*, he mentally sneered—was stronger than Cam would have thought, and didn't flinch. The dandy was shorter than Cam, but then most everyone was, and had dark hair styled with something expensive-looking. A *school-teacher*. She was interested in this school-teacher? This delicate weakling?

Then Carderock actually *squeezed* his hand in response, and Cam's

brows shot up in grudging admiration. He didn't know many men as strong as he was, and now he had to reevaluate his impression of the newcomer. Sebastian Carderock wasn't a weakling, but he still didn't belong out here. Wyoming belonged to the tough and the driven; men like Cam and Ash Barker and Stan Selkirk, who'd built something out of nothing and made it thrive. Posh and cultured citified men had no place in the Territory. All they'd do was live here in the city and make it classier and more civilized.

...exactly the way Serena wanted to do. Cam pushed the thought away, but it kept creeping back, especially when he saw her smile at Carderock. He'd been wrestling with the basic differences for weeks now. If he loved her, how could he hate the thought of being stuck living in the city? And how could he ask her to live on the Open Skye with him and his father, knowing that she'd hate it? But here was the kind of man she'd probably be really happy with. The kind of man she deserved.

Cam nearly spat at the thought. She deserved better than this fop.

And then he glanced at her, and saw the hope brimming in her eyes, and knew he couldn't disappoint her. She was expecting politeness from him, and he sighed. Sometimes cows were so much easier to deal with than people. "New York City, huh? What do you think of our little town?"

His brows rose again at the excitement that suddenly lit up the other man's face. "Not so *little*, Mr. MacLeod! Cheyenne is a growing, changing, dynamic city, and I'm thrilled to be here and be a part of it." Yeah, those were exactly the things that made Cam dislike the city. "The level of culture—fueled, I'm sure, by being on the direct rail line—is astounding. There will be an Opera House here next year! I'm still amazed by that."

"Is it true you've invested in it?" Serena's voice was a little breathless, and Cam's jealousy reared again. This dandy was rich too?

Sebastian nodded. "I've always enjoyed fine music. How could I not make every effort to spread that pleasure? And judging from the audiences I've seen already in Cheyenne, they hunger for more. I only had to look around the church this morning to see fellow music lovers. The Cheyenne Theater is perfectly adequate, but I'm sure we'll all appreciate a dedicated music venue. I think the Opera House will make a good return, and I'm proud to be a part of it."

Serena was flushing, and Cam was a little sick to think that it was from pleasure. "I'm sure Mr. Kaminsky would be thrilled to hear your praises. He is, I think, Cheyenne's most accomplished fiddler. Don't you agree, Cam?"

He appreciated her attempts to draw him into the conversation, and having heard the man fiddle at last year's Independence Day

bonfire, he agreed with her assessment. But he just grunted non-committedly, not willing to trust himself to speak. Carderock didn't have any trouble speaking up. "I agree, Miss Serena. I definitely could not have matched his skill, and I taught the violin for three years."

He *played the violin*? Here he stood in the middle of the Cheyenne dust, dressed in a full-on morning suit with top hat, and talked about Opera and playing violin? Didn't he realize Wyoming was no place for someone like him? "The violin?" He tried to keep the smirk out of his voice, but was pretty sure Carderock heard it, based on the way the other man's eyes went hard.

"Indeed, Mr. MacLeod. Learning music makes learning math easier, since it can all essentially be simplified to numbers. I've found that many students understand their math lecture more easily after a lesson with a musical instrument." Cam had never heard a bigger crock of bull in his life. Math? Music? Who needed such useless *lessons* out here on the range?

Serena was standing beside Carderock, and Cam tried not to notice that they made a fine pair. It helped that her eyes were shining with an excitement he'd never seen her express in *his* presence before. "Sebastian spent three years teaching at *Eton*—that's a *very* prestigious boarding school in England—before coming here."

The muscles of Cam's jaw hardened. He'd grown up in Glengarry County, surrounded by other descendants of Highlanders pushed out of their homes by greedy landlords during the Clearances. These bitter Scots had no love for the English, despite being Canadian citizens, and it had rubbed off on Cam. "So you're English, eh? Should I call you *m'lord*?"

He was being rude and petty, and saw Serena's disappointed look. "Don't be silly, Cam. He taught at a school in England," her voice sharpened, "that doesn't make him a lord." Cam frowned, knowing he should apologize for such a childish remark, but unwilling to. Hell, the man might as well be a prince, strutting out to Wyoming like he owned the place, so sure of his reception by the most eligible miss in town...

"Why not speak for yourself, Carderock? Too busy hiding behind a woman's skirts?"

Cam saw Carderock's jaw clench at the taunt, and the other man took a step closer to him, fists balled at his side. Not wanting to back down, Cam stepped forward as well, and was impressed despite himself when Carderock took *another* step. Cam knew that he was a big man, and could be intimidating. But here was a citified, violin-playing, almost-English *math teacher* standing up to him.

"I'm not hiding. I'm deliberating."

"Fancy words meaning you're thinking about hitting me?"



“No. I’m trying to convince myself *not* to.”

Cam saw the cold anger in the other man’s eyes, and knew that he was telling the truth. Carderock *wanted* to hit him. “Out here, a man has to fight sometimes, to protect what’s his.” He was talking about Serena, and knew that Carderock understood.

“Civilized men can debate logically, no matter their location.” Carderock’s words might be elegant, but he was still restraining himself. Because in front of a church with Serena looking on wasn’t the time or place for a fight? Or because he was scared of Cam? No, there wasn’t fear in his pretty-boy face, but determination. It took guts to stand up to someone a head taller than him, and Cam hadn’t expected that. Hadn’t expected Carderock to be that tough.

And *that* made Cam even more irate, to think that a dandy like Carderock could have any worthwhile characteristics. Anything that might make Cam respect him, even a bit. He was chewing on his own ire and jealousy and itching for a fight. He wondered if Carderock was enough of a man to give him one.

“Well, welcome to Wyoming,” Cam snarled as he threw the punch.

To his surprise, the younger man didn’t go down. That aristocratic nose gave beneath Cam’s fist as the dark head snapped backwards, and Carderock took a step backwards. But he took the punch better than he had any right to. Serena had gasped, her hand going to her mouth in shock, and Cam wondered if it’d been smart to show his anger in front of her.

Carderock’s eyes were dark ice when he raised a handkerchief to his nose to stop the bleeding, his free hand fisting and opening by his side. Cam could tell the other man wanted to hit him back, to inflict damage, despite his size.

Cam felt acid in his stomach, realizing that this *dandy* was showing more self-restraint than he had. He had more control than Cam had ever had, especially when it came to Serena.

And in that moment, watching the woman he thought he loved fussing over another man, he wondered if he’d lost her entirely. Not wanting to be there when the other man realized he’d won by reining in his anger, Cam turned on his heel and stalked off, trying not to think about the disappointment on Serena’s face when she’d looked at him.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



Serena was strolling with her aunts through the quilt exhibit, admiring the beautiful works of art that were for sale or auction, when she heard a deep, masculine voice calling her name. Her heart in her throat, she spun around and swallowed in slight disappointment to see Ash approaching her with Molly pulled against his side happily. Pete was hanging on his other hand, swinging back and forth in excitement, chattering up at his father. Ash's grin told Serena that he was thrilled to be back with his family after their separation.

She smiled back in genuine pleasure, and went to place a kiss on his proffered cheek. She forgave herself her moment's disappointment upon realizing that it wasn't Sebastian calling her name. She'd been on tenterhooks all morning, wondering if she'd really see him today, if he'd really bid on her basket.

After that horrible scene Cam had caused yesterday at church, Sebastian had been distant, aloof. She assumed it was because the poor man was in pain, but he assured her that he was fine, and had taken worse knocks in college. She didn't know what had come over Cam, but she hadn't liked the heated look in his eyes right before he hit Sebastian. Serena hated violent displays, and didn't know if she could trust Cam anymore. Her Daddy had been like that, a man of action; strong words and stronger fists. It made him a miserable family man, but a fine rancher.

Sebastian, on the other hand, had taken the punch like a perfect gentleman, remaining calm and icy even after Cam had left. She'd been impressed by his control, even while he allowed her to fuss over him.

"Hey, Serena."

"Happy Fourth of July, Nate." She shook herself out of her worries and smiled at Ash's brother, who was signing for Annie. Little Noah was perched happily atop his uncle's shoulders, munching on a stick of cinnamon candy. He grinned toothily at Serena, and when she saw that his mouth and tongue were an unnatural red, she had to chuckle. *This*—a sticky boy happily surveying the crowds from his high perch—seemed to personify a perfect Fourth of July celebration.

Her aunts fell into chatting happily with the newcomers, and

Serena learned that Nate and Ash had only just arrived. They left their horses at the livery for an outrageous cost, and came to meet their family at the fairgrounds. Like last year, they planned to stay overnight in the city, so as to enjoy the bonfire tonight, and then head home tomorrow with Molly, Annie and the boys. Serena knew that her friends enjoyed their little ‘vacation’ in the city, but judging from the look of love in Molly’s eyes, she’d be happy to be back where she belonged. With her husband.

Serena sighed slightly. Was she foolish for wanting to live here in the city? Molly and Annie—and hundreds of other women—were content living and working on their husbands’ ranches. Cam’s offer was a good one, even if he hadn’t disappointed her by letting her see his anger. But she just didn’t *want* to live on the Open Skye, or even the Double-S. She’d hated the mind-numbing effort it’d taken to keep her father’s ranch barely functioning for the last two years. She’d sell it if she could, if there was anyone who could afford it. But then what? She hadn’t fibbed to her aunts and Sebastian; she really did like the idea of teaching literature to schoolchildren. But she knew that the salary of a female teacher wasn’t nearly enough to support her and her two aunts in the manner to which they’d become accustomed, living off of the ranch proceeds all these years.

But then she remembered the basket auction, and more importantly, the men involved. Cam had said that he would be bidding on hers, and she wasn’t surprised. He’d been courting her outright since that visit to the Double-S in June. But Sebastian... Sebastian had said that he’d be bidding as well. A bid on a basket wasn’t *exactly* a public declaration of courting, and some men didn’t take it seriously. But it indicated that the man was interested in getting to know the lady better by spending time together, in public and private—or as near to private as one could get with two meddling aunts as chaperones.

Would he bid? Would he be interested in spending time with her, even after yesterday’s debacle? Was he considering—she caught her breath at the thought—*courting her*? Yesterday her knees had gone weak when he’d approached after church and bowed over her hand like a prince, with his learning and sophistication and that beautiful dimple! He was quite literally a dream come true, and she was just a Wyoming ranch girl who wanted to live in the big city. She sighed again, but this time it was in slight dejection. Why would he ever want to court someone like her? He probably had hundreds of ladies waiting for him back in New York City, all more beautiful and urbane than she was. She scowled at the thought. *I’ll bet none of them have to ride astride or worry about hats to shade their cheeks.*

She reached up to adjust the offending hat, but calmed the

moment her hand touched the straw. She was really quite proud of the creation, having bought it plain and decorated it herself to match the dress—yellow with a black lace trim—that she had chosen to wear today. She and her aunts had gained a little fame for their beautiful hats, and they always received compliments. *I'll bet none of those fine New York ladies have to decorate their own hats, either!* But this time there was a little pride mixed in. She might not be one of those beautiful and worldly ladies Sebastian had left behind, but she had worth nonetheless. She'd managed a ranch, and organized charitable functions, and might one day teach. Those ladies might have nothing better to do than sit inside and play the piano and speak French, but she was *almost* as accomplished. She could play the piano and speak passable French *and* run a cattle ranch if necessary.

Serena was feeling a little better when she felt Annie take her hand. They strolled through the quilts and on towards the race track, with the girl gently tugging. Serena smiled, and since they were all trying to accommodate Sebastian's oralist techniques, made sure that she was facing the girl when she said, rather than signed, "Did you enter any horses this year?"

Entering—and winning—past Fourth of July races had served as a sort of advertisement for Ash and Nate. Their horse breeding and training became known far and wide, and people now came from well beyond Cheyenne to buy from them. They now had two extra hands working with them, and had built yet another set of stables last year. But Serena hadn't heard that they were bringing any animals to town this year, so she assumed they didn't need any more fame.

"Nah dis...tahm." *Not this time.* There were sounds that no-one had known how to teach Annie, if she didn't remember hearing them when she was a baby. The "th" sound was one, and vowels were another. But over the last week, sharing a room with the girl, Serena had been impressed by how often she was willing to try to speak. It was amazing how far she was willing to push herself, to have the chance to attend school.

Serena nodded and shrugged dismissively. "Well, it's not like you and your brothers *need* any more fame. If you won again, you wouldn't have enough horses to supply all of the demand!"

Annie giggled appreciatively, and they linked arms again to stroll towards the track. The two of them—so similar in size, but one a girl and one clearly a woman—spent an entertaining few minutes watching the horses prance and gallop by. They laughed and signed and privately judged all the animals themselves, and then went to set up the courses and equipment for the sack and egg races. Serena had taken over the arrangements, and was looking forward to watching the children compete for the little homemade ribbons she'd helped

sew. And amid the excitement, Serena managed to forget all about the upcoming basket auction, *and* Sebastian and Cam...almost.



Sebastian had thought that New York City in high August was sweltering, but it couldn't compare to a Cheyenne Fourth of July. He was thankful for the hat—a straw boater, which was ridiculous considering they were hundreds of miles from the closest lake—that was at least protecting his head from the sun. His nose ached, but luckily wasn't broken. He'd bruised a bit under his right eye, but it was minor, and he didn't think anyone would notice, especially in the shade of the hat. Once again he thanked his old boxing instructor for teaching him how to roll with the punches.

It hadn't been a complete surprise, when MacLeod threw that punch, so he'd known how to minimize the effect. And he'd wanted *so badly* to return the favor to the larger man, to show him that Sebastian Carderock wasn't the weakling he'd assumed. But Serena was watching, and he knew how she felt about big men, violent men... and so he'd reined in his anger. And *that* had bothered MacLeod even more than his obvious affection for Serena.

But MacLeod had left, and he'd had Serena—and her tender administrations—all to himself. All things considered, if he had to be punched, then that was probably the best way to do it. Impress a lady and irritate his adversary, who obviously had designs on Serena.

Now, despite the heat, he stood on the fairgrounds with his new business partners-- Misters Hay, Carey and Whipple and their wives—and waited with just a hint of impatience for the basket auction to start. They'd already heard speeches from the mayor, and quite a few government representatives about the possibilities of Wyoming becoming a state soon, and other positive goals for the future. The attack on President Garfield was a popular theme, juxtaposed with the discussions on statehood. He thought it interesting how citizens of a Territory that wasn't yet a state could care so deeply about the birth of the United States of America. They could sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee", and wave thirty-eight-starred flags, all the while knowing full well they didn't have the same rights and representation as states back east.

Normally, Sebastian would have been fascinated by the rhetoric and dichotomy, but he found himself shifting his weight impatiently. Henry noticed his tenseness, and made a joke to his companions at Sebastian's expense. He laughed along with the rest of them, good-naturedly. He'd enjoyed their company over the weeks he'd been in Cheyenne; they were the sort of intelligent, well-connected men with

whom he'd always engaged. Their wives, on the other hand, were a different breed entirely. As soon as they'd discovered that his long-term goals in Cheyenne included, well, long-term goals *in* Cheyenne, they'd smiled hugely and starting to titter among themselves. They'd... *organized*.

Not to say that the ladies back East were vapid and timid creatures—his mother and sister certainly weren't—but the ladies out here were different. He'd never seen so much *organization* come out of one group before. They sprang into action, calling upon friends and family and acquaintances, and now he had a whole list of social obligations, quite a few new friends, and several sets of house designs for when he finally settled on a builder.

Of course, their priority was finding him a “church family”, but he was perfectly content at the First Congregational Church for the time being. After all, Reverend Davis wasn't boring, and Serena attended. If everything went as he was hoping, and he convinced her to marry him, then he planned to make things as easy for her as possible. He didn't tell any of the ladies *that* though, because of their second priority: getting him married.

In the past week, he'd met three different eligible—mostly young—women, all thanks to Mrs. Hay and Mrs. Whipple. He hadn't spent any length of time with any of the ladies, and certainly not in private. And none of them had sparked even a bit of interest in him. They were all too vapid, too self-centered. It didn't take him long to figure out that he was comparing them all to Serena.

That wasn't hard to believe, though, since he hadn't stopped thinking about her since... well, since he'd met her, he supposed. He'd been enjoying the Fourth of July celebrations so far, but the highlight for him was going to be the basket auction, where he'd be able to ‘formally’ announce his intentions.

His *attentions*.

Mrs. Whipple twittered excitedly, and he dragged his attention back to the here and now. The mayor was done with his speech, and had introduced two women—Sebastian had missed their names in his distraction—who were currently arranging some picnic baskets. Henry had explained that sometimes basket auctions were done anonymously, but in Cheyenne they put each basket up on the dais and called out the bids, just like a real auction. It was always exciting, and since it was for a good cause, no young lady was ever embarrassed. “Besides,” his new partner had said with a chuckle, “It's not like we got so many ladies out here that we're not going to marry off every eligible one!”

The system was simple; one of the women would describe, in loving detail, the contents of the basket, making sure to nonchalantly

drop the maker's name into the description. After all, the auction was supposed to be all about the contents, not the lady who assembled them. But the interest in each basket's contents was only until the audience heard the lady's name; after that, they knew whether they wanted to bid or not. As the bidding started on the first basket, with the young lady in question looking suitably demure and excited all at once, Sebastian realized that it could have been filled with manure; the bidders were only interested in laying a sort of claim to the lady.

He felt himself drawn along with the rest of the crowd, as the excitement built. There was a blood-sport feel to the entire proceedings, just like the watchers of a game of kick-ball. It was almost barbaric, as if the mob waited to see who would win the woman, but Sebastian appreciated the thrill of the competition. When one man ended the winner, and left the proceedings with the basket on one arm and the lady on the other, Sebastian deflated just a bit, and understood the draw of the auction for the rest of the audience.

He listened intently as each basket was described, but once he heard the lady's name—and it wasn't Serena's—then he'd turn his attention to the bidders. He felt his companion's curious looks, and he knew that they were wondering when *he'd* start bidding. He gave them no indication that he was there to do anything other than enjoy the sport. Even so, after the second time he didn't bid on a basket from one of the ladies Mrs. Hay had introduced him to, he could hear her whispering to her friend.

And then he stopped listening to her at all, because the lady up on stage mentioned blueberry jam, and then Serena's name.

He heard one of his companions chuckle, and realized it was because he'd taken a step forward expectantly, craning his neck to see over the sea of cowboy hats between him and the stage. The bidding started low, and he was about to open, when he heard another voice.

"Five dollars." It was MacLeod. Sebastian had known yesterday that the big blonde man was interested in Serena, and now he had proof. If punching him hadn't been enough, that is. He'd hoped MacLeod wouldn't bother either of them anymore, but he'd underestimated the cowboy's tenacity. Because there the giant stood, beside an even-taller man, next to Molly Barker. Molly's husband—Sebastian remembered that his name was Ash—was going to be in town for the festivities, and since they were MacLeod's neighbors, the man would have felt comfortable joining them.... Ah, yes, there was Serena, standing with Annie, half-blocked by Mr. Barker's bulk.

Sebastian stepped forward again, so that he could see her. Her cheeks were pink, but he wasn't sure if it was from excitement or the sun. She was very firmly not looking at MacLeod, but seemed to be ignoring her companions' attempts at conversation.

He smiled slowly, and drawled out “Ten dollars.”

There were hoots and cheers and gasps all around him. Sebastian knew that raising the bid five whole dollars, especially opening with a high number, was unusual, but what did he care? He had the money, and didn’t intend to lose. Carderocks didn’t lose.

He loved the way her gaze flew to his when she heard his bid, and she tried to look away. But he smiled again, and knew when she was hooked. Those beautiful lips formed a perfect little “o”, and he felt his heart beating faster. He told himself it was because of the thrill of the bidding, but knew the truth; he wanted Serena Selkirk more than he’d wanted anything in his life.

MacLeod bid twelve dollars, and he immediately upped it to fifteen in a loud and clear voice, without breaking eye contact with her. He saw her cheeks pinken further, watched the little fluttery pulse in the base of her neck, and took three steps towards her before he knew what he was doing. She jerked, as if she’d started to meet him, but had thought better of it.

“Sixteen.” MacLeod sounded reluctant.

“Twenty.” Sebastian didn’t need to push people out of the way; they were as involved in the drama as he had been, and gladly formed a clear space between the two. Serena must have overcome her hesitation, because suddenly she was moving towards him.

“Twenty-two dollars.”

Sebastian still hadn’t looked at MacLeod, but heard the man’s reluctance. He was a self-made rancher, but unlike the men Sebastian had met at the Club, he hadn’t made his fortune quite yet. Twenty-two dollars was almost a month’s salary for one of Cam’s cowhands; it was a lot of money to spend on some jam, and dinner with a lady.

But not just any lady. There wasn’t an amount of money that *wouldn’t* be worth it to Sebastian. “Fifty dollars.”

This time he heard the gasp and the ripple of conversation as he called out his amount. Fifty dollars was practically unheard of, for a basket. And to jump twenty-eight dollars to that amount, just to cut off MacLeod’s bidding? It was practically outrageous. And Sebastian couldn’t have been grinning bigger when he met Serena in the now-empty patch of grass.

They stood, staring at one another, and the surrounding crowd melted away. He loved the way she met his eyes boldly, even with the pink tint of embarrassment—and dare he hope pleasure?—on her cheeks. Her hands were fidgeting at her side, and so he grabbed one, just to calm her. She sighed, seemed to melt before his eyes, and a soft smile formed on her lips.

The ladies up on the dais were all atwitter at the bidding, hoping that MacLeod would continue to bid. Sebastian honestly didn’t care;



he would win the auction. He suddenly understood the way those other men—the men who'd participated in the earlier auctions that he'd considered slightly barbaric—had felt. He *was* going to win this. He'd win her, and it didn't matter who thought they'd stand in his way.

"Sebastian?" He felt, more than heard her whisper. "Fifty dollars is too much. It's just a basket."

His smile was slow and easy, and he loved the way she caught her breath. "Nothing's too much for you, Serena."

"Oh." It was more of a sigh than anything else.

"Fifty-one dollars." Didn't the man know when to quit? Apparently not. MacLeod's bid had taken a long time, but Sebastian didn't bother tearing his gaze away from hers to look at his opponent. His answering bid was immediate.

"Fifty-two."

"Fifty-three." He heard someone say "Oh, Cam, *really!*" before being drowned out by the crowd's roar of approval at this spectacle.

And then there was a hush, as everyone looked to him to see what he'd do. He knew it. He knew how to hold a crowd—he was a teacher, for crying out loud—and he knew what to do with his money.

Slowly, he lifted her hand, drawing small circles on the backs of her fingers with his thumb. She still hadn't taken a real breath, and he liked the way she reacted to his touch. And then, with everyone watching, he placed a kiss on the back of her hand, and heard her sharp intake of air. Smiling wickedly now, he turned her hand over to place another kiss on the inside of her wrist. Her skin was warm against his lips, and he felt like he was marking her. Branding her as his. The teacher—the modern gentleman—couldn't help but find it barbarous; but the *man* in him appreciated the symbolism.

Still smiling, he called out clearly in the hush, "One hundred dollars."

They erupted. There wasn't another word for the way the crowd burst into noise when the lady on the dais banged her gavel, but Sebastian didn't have a thought to spare for them. He was utterly captivated by a pair of violet eyes.

He dropped his lips towards hers, and was encouraged when she met him. Their kiss was sweet and powerful and full of promise. She smelled of everything good in the world, and he nibbled at her lower lip until hers parted, and he was able to chase her tongue with his own. She made a sexy little whimper in the back of her throat, and he wanted to crush her to him. It was so hard to refrain; he didn't want to startle her or scare her away. But then he felt her small hand—the one he wasn't still holding tightly—clutch onto his jacket sleeve, as if to hold herself upright, and he smiled against her lips.

It seemed like hours before he finally forced himself to disengage, to hear the catcalls and the hoots, to listen to the church ladies desperately trying to control the crowd. He stared down at Serena, slightly flushed and breathing hard, her lips red and bruised and utterly desirable. It took him two tries to get the invitation out. “Miss Selkirk, I’d be honored if you’d picnic with me.”

She gave him a dazed nod, and took his offered arm. Did he strut a little as they made their way towards the dais? Maybe, but he thought he was justified. He’d just ‘won’ the woman of his dreams, and he wasn’t going to let her go. Ever.

The realization made him happier than he would have imagined.



Later, Serena wouldn’t have been able to say exactly what happened that afternoon. She remembered walking beside Sebastian, clutching his arm, afraid if she let go that he’d slip away and it would all turn out to be a daydream. She was promenading on a cloud, surely the envy of every woman at the Fourth of July barbeque. Maybe every woman in Cheyenne! She was giddy and breathless and finally understood what all of those heroines in the novels felt like.

Her first *real* kiss! It had been... well, it had been everything she’d ever hoped it would be. It had been everything Cam’s hadn’t been. It had been wonderful. Arousing. Breath-taking. She didn’t know if she *knew* enough words to describe how it had made her feel, and it was all because *he’d* been the one to share it with her. Sebastian Carderock, the prince of her dreams, had *kissed* her. She thought she would be excused if she gave a little skip of happiness.

After the auction, they laid out a blanket under a spreading tree, and he fetched two heaping plates of beef and salads and cakes and cheeses, and a tall glass of lemonade to share. They laughed and fed one another and compared and chose favorites, and then he went to get more. Truthfully, Serena wouldn’t be able to recall what she’d eaten, even later that day; she was still so bemused by the entire experience.

She might have been able to regain some control of her own wild emotions and reactions, had Sebastian not continued to find excuses to touch her. But he did. His hand brushed against hers whenever they exchanged plates, and twice he stroked her cheek and chin when he said she had crumbs there. And once—oh Heavens!—he actually *fed* her a particularly delicious piece of cookie. Serena nearly choked, she was so surprised by the feel of those smooth fingers against her lower lip.

It was an afternoon of sighing, of holding her breath and

wondering if he'd kiss her again. Of laughter and confidences and admiration and discussions of the future. It didn't take long for Serena to realize that he was *courting* her. And that's when she nearly fainted from the heady rush of pleasure. He was courting *her*. That kiss might be the first of many. That wondrous kiss she hoped to repeat many, many times.

And then they did. There, on the blanket under a grand tree, surrounded by other couples who were diligently pretending not to be chaperones, he kissed her. It was just as glorious as the first, but she enjoyed it even more. Maybe it was because she made herself relax and appreciate the experience. Maybe it was the way he took the time to make her feel comfortable with each step before he moved on to the next. Maybe it was the scandalously wanton way she felt when his tongue teased hers. Maybe it was just because she was in love with him.

Oh yes, she'd given up pretending. She was utterly in love with Sebastian Carderock.

She sighed against his lips when he finally ended his sweet torture. And just in time, because a great weight fell across her back, pushing her back into Sebastian's arms. It was little Pete, followed by his brother and then the rest of his family. Molly smiled apologetically and explained that Serena's aunts were dining with their friends, and had left her to "see to the lovebirds". Serena blushed and glanced at Sebastian, but he couldn't be more gracious. He stood and shook Ash's hand, making small talk. When Nate returned with Annie, passing out plates of cookies and cakes, Serena was heartened to see the way Sebastian sized up the young part-Indian man. She knew that Nate had experienced more than his share of prejudice in his life, from men very much like Sebastian. But her beau smiled and offered the younger man his hand, and Nate shook it solemnly.

They packed up the dinner dishes in the auction basket, and all joked and laughed as the sun sunk in the sky. Despite her aunts' absence, Serena knew that she was among her family. And her family—the people who were closest to her and understood her the best—accepted Sebastian as one of their own. She knew that he'd be welcome in her life.

She wasn't sure what had happened to Cam, where he'd gone after losing the auction to Sebastian. She wanted not to care, especially after his display the day before... but she couldn't. He was a friend and a neighbor, whom she'd known for years. But despite his proposal, she'd known that he wasn't right for her for... well, since the beginning. She'd wanted something more than the life Cam could offer her, but didn't know what that was until Sebastian had come along. Until she'd met a man who made her heart sing and her breath hitch

and her palms itch and her soul smile. Cam would never be that man for her. Sebastian made her feel alive in ways she'd never dreamed.

No doubt about it: she was a woman in love.

## CHAPTER NINE



Molly smiled as she watched her friend with Sebastian. It was obvious to her that Serena couldn't be happier with the outcome of the basket auction, and Molly was pleased everything had worked out. Cam had stood with them—he and Ash were trusted friends—and she'd tried to stop him from wasting his money on Serena's basket. She'd known how he thought he felt about Serena, and known that those feelings weren't true. He probably thought he loved her, but would soon realize he loved the idea of a new wife and a fine spread. She'd also known that there was no way he'd be able to outbid someone as wealthy as Sebastian Carderock.

Besides, anyone could look at Serena and Sebastian together and see that they were a perfect match. They looked like a painting, so achingly beautiful and perfect. And when they smiled at one another...! She sighed, and reached for Ash's hand. He squeezed it, and she smiled up at him.

Ash pulled her against him, and placed a kiss on her forehead. Smiling, she stretched up to peck his cheek. After six years of marriage, she still loved his touch just as much as in the beginning. But seeing Sebastian's display at the auction today had brought back memories of the first time Ash had kissed her; the breathless anticipation and heady rush of desire. And now, embracing her husband, feeling his heat against her palms, she knew that she was right where she was supposed to be. They'd had their ups and downs over the last years, but they'd built a beautiful life. And maybe in the spring they'd have another child, another reason to celebrate together.

Her cheek pillowed against Ash's shoulder, one of his strong arms wrapped around her, she watched her friend through eyes misty with unshed tears. Yes, she had a beautiful life, and while she knew it was nothing like the one Serena hoped to build, she wished her friend success in creating one equally wonderful.

"You're thinking about the future, aren't you?" Ash's quiet rumble was for her ears alone.

She smiled, and squeezed him once. "Yes. And how lucky I've been."

He nudged her chin up with his free hand, until she was staring

into his smoky gray eyes. "And I'm not?" He kissed her then, and it was everything it'd always been. Sweet and strong and full of promise. "I love you, Mrs. Barker."

"I love you too, Ash."

"You think you can remember that later tonight?" She felt her pulse speed up in anticipation at his sly grin. "I've missed you. A week is a long time."

"You know we'll be sharing a room with the boys. Pete will already be cranky from sleeping on the floor."

"So they can sleep on the chaise in the parlor." He kissed her again, and she couldn't help the small blush that crept up her cheeks. She tried to remind herself that they were married, and it was perfectly natural to be talking about such things, but she couldn't help but feel a little wanton.

"And what about Nate? He was going to sleep in the parlor."

Ash chuckled, and squeezed her once. "Not if he's smart. There are plenty of women who'll share a room with him tonight." Molly knew he was talking about whores, and rolled her eyes. How her brother-in-law spent his nights in town was certainly not any concern of hers.

The young man in question was currently chatting with Sebastian, who was managing a spirited discussion even with his attention fully focused on Serena. Molly had to admire the way he'd accepted Nate as Ash's brother without blinking an eye, and treated the young man—Indian blood and all—as an equal. She knew that Sebastian was planning to stay out here in Cheyenne, rather than returning to a life of ease back East, and it was a good sign that he accepted a man based on his merit and abilities, rather than his blood. In the six years she'd been living west of Chicago, she realized that those ideals were pretty much what their world was built on. Sebastian Carderock would do well in Wyoming, and Cheyenne needed men like him.

She put her musings behind her when Serena's aunts arrived, all atwitter from the gossip they seemed to eat and breathe at these gatherings. It was funny to see the way they could carry on a conversation, finishing each other's sentences without a thought. They rushed to the young couple, but Molly could see their smiles through their scolding.

"Sebastian, dear, you are *quite* the talk—"

"—of the town! That kiss, sir...!"

"Poor Serena's reputation would have been ruined—"

"*Quite* ruined!"

"—had it not been, well, understandable. As it was, I'm sure we were all swept up—"

"*Quite* swept up!"

"—in the drama and the romance. You had all of us sighing like

ninnies, I'm sure."

"Oh yes, you looked like *quite* the ninny, sister." By Molly's count, that was four 'quites', indicating that they were flustered.

Her sister gasped, "And *you* didn't? Don't think I didn't notice the way you were sniffing into that handkerchief, you old bat!"

Molly glanced at Ash, who had shoved both his hands in his pockets, and was staring up at the cloudless sky resignedly, trying not to smile.

"Miss Agatha, I'm sure you didn't look anything like a ninny." Sebastian's voice was smooth and calming, and sure enough, the older lady immediately preened under his attention. "And Miss Agnes, I'm sorry if my attentions caused inappropriate talk. I was...*quite* overcome."

Molly had to turn away to hide her smile. He was a master when it came to dealing with Serena's aunts, and seemed to understand that the ladies were usually just playing the roles they thought they ought to. More importantly, he was the only person she knew—Serena included—who always seemed to know which twin was which. Even Serena admitted to not being able to tell them apart just by looking at them, and sometimes not even once they'd started bickering. But in all the times Molly had seen Sebastian interacting with the two older ladies, he'd always been able to identify them by name, immediately.

"Can I fetch you some dinner, Miss Agatha? Miss Agnes?"

Both ladies scoffed. "We ate hours ago, dear, but—"

"—thank you just the same. We just came to fetch you for the bonfire. Mrs. Davis mentioned that they'll be starting it earlier this year—"

"—after all the trouble they had last year."

Sebastian turned to smile at Serena, who had sidled up to him and taken his hand. "Well, darling?" Molly saw her sigh dreamily. "Shall we escort your aunts to the bonfire?"

Serena seemed lost in his eyes, and he didn't make any effort to distract her. Finally, Agnes—or maybe Agatha—*tsked* lightly. "I think it was probably a mistake to invite them."

"Yes!" her sister answered. "In their current state, they'll probably wander into the fire on accident, and we'll have another repeat of that excitement from last year."

"Oh dear. We'll need another escort." In unison, both ladies turned to Molly's young brother-in-law, who was giving Noah a piggy-back ride, and hollered "Nathaniel!"

Everyone burst into laughter at their exchange, including Sebastian and Serena. Nate took one look at the happy young couple, and nudged Pete towards Agatha...or maybe Agnes. Offering his own arm to the other twin, with his nephew still on his back, the entire group

started making their way towards the bonfire site.

The fires were actually set up in a ring, because it was just too warm to make one big conflagration. Lighting the blazes was always an exciting ceremony, and the young men who arranged it all did a wonderful job. They all sung "The Star-Spangled Banner" as the flames caught, and cheered wildly once the bonfires flared up. There was singing and dancing, and Serena even convinced Sebastian to borrow Mr. Kaminsky's fiddle to play for them. He chose a haunting air that left several ladies wiping away tears, and then swept Serena up into a jig that obviously left her breathless. Yes, he was a welcome addition to Cheyenne society, and would fit in well.

It wasn't until an hour after dark that Molly began to think of rounding up her sons for bed. They'd joined the pack of wild urchins scampering among the crowds of their elders, and she'd seen them only occasionally all evening. She trusted Pete to keep Noah out of trouble, and all parents kept an eye on all the children. In fact, coming to social gatherings like this was often a relief for Molly, and other mothers. It allowed them to just be themselves, without having to constantly be a mother. She'd danced, and sang, and laughed, and kissed Ash more than usual. She was feeling grand.

Until she reached out and snagged Pete when he ran by. "It's time to get ready to go, Peter. Where's your brother?"

His beautiful face was streaked with dirt when he shrugged up at her. "I dunno. I thought he was with you."

Her heart lurched, and she choked on the breath that wouldn't come. "When did you see him last? Where?" She knew her voice was shrill, but couldn't seem to make herself calm down. Had they been at home, she'd trust that Noah wasn't in too much trouble; but here, surrounded by so many exotic dangers, there was no end to the trouble he could get into. She felt light-headed at the thought. Her panic affected her son, and he didn't even seem to realize that she was gripping his shoulders.

"A while ago. He got angry 'cause he tripped and I didn't stop to help him. He said he was going to find you."

*Oh God.* "And you haven't seen him since then? Where were you?" Pete wordlessly pointed to the far side of the clearing, away from the bonfires. She pressed his pale face to her, trying not to think of all the dangers that could await a little boy in the Cheyenne wilderness, and determined not to make Pete feel guilty.

Ash had seen her gripping Pete. "Molly? What's wrong?"

"Noah is missing," she croaked out, and told her husband everything she'd learned. The rest of their friends gathered around, silent and worried.

Her husband pulled her into his arms, and she gladly released Pete



to accept Ash's comfort. He squeezed her. "We'll find him, don't worry." She tried to nod, tried not to think about the bonfire or the river or the snakes or all the other dangers, and just focus on finding her precious little angel.

"What can we do?" Sebastian's question was muted, but Molly didn't know if he was whispering, or if she couldn't hear him over the pounding of her pulse in her ears.

"I'll start in that direction, asking people." Nate's response was quick. "You can head around that way, and we'll meet on the other side of the clearing." The two young men rushed off in opposite directions.

"We'll check with our friends, maybe someone has seen him." Agnes and Agatha scampered off directly towards the fire, and Molly was grateful to know someone was looking in the most dangerous area, just in case her baby had gone that way.

Ash squeezed her once more. "I'll take Pete, he can show me where Noah was. You and Annie stay here, in case Noah is looking for you. If we don't find him now, we'll form a bigger search party." Molly mutely nodded, and gratefully clutched her little sister's hand when Annie offered it to her.

They stood there alone, Molly trying desperately not to cry, and watched her loved ones disappear into the crowd. *Dear God, let them find him safe!*



Cam ate standing up, near the long tables that had been arranged for the picnickers. He was trying to avoid interaction with them, still not sure how he felt about the outcome of the auction. Yeah, he'd wanted Serena, wanted to be eating with her right now. But fifty dollars? What had he been thinking? He couldn't afford to spend fifty dollars on something that... frivolous. He'd busted his tail for every dime he could count to his name, and needed it all to build his ranch into what he hoped it could one day be. It had been a lapse, a momentary foolishness, which had made him bid so high. Just like how he'd let his anger get the better of him yesterday outside of church, he'd been wrapped up in the competition, the desire to 'win' Serena.

And now he felt like a fool, and a mighty lucky one at that. A *hundred dollars*. He'd really dodged a bullet there. It was lucky that Carderock'd had enough money to cover that stupid fifty-dollar bid, or he'd be stuck paying it. He tried to tell himself that Serena was worth fifty dollars—a hundred dollars!—but that sure was a lot of money.

It was about that time that he'd figured out that maybe he didn't

love Serena as much as he'd thought, if he was fixing to begrudge her fifty bucks.

So he was downright confused about his feelings at the moment, and that's why he spent his meal standing away from everyone. He didn't want to sit with any of the few people he knew in town, or to meet anyone else. He didn't want to have to listen to the whispers and see the pitying looks. He just wanted to be alone for a while to enjoy the food.

And enjoy it, he did. By his second helping of barbeque, lamb shank, potato salad, green beans, lima beans and honey corn bread, he was fixing to burst. He wished there was a way to bring some home to Da, but the old man'd made his choice when he'd decided not to come. Cam cleaned off his plate, gladly took an offered beer, and ambled over to the dessert tables. The cakes and cookies and pies were mighty tempting, but he figured he'd have to wait an hour or so to be able to fit any more food in.

He spent awhile just strolling through the crowds, occasionally nodding hello or exchanging a greeting with someone he recognized from church. The Barkers, the Selkirks, and a few families from church were pretty much the only people around Cheyenne he knew well enough to name. He just didn't get into town enough to call anyone a friend. In fact, besides his father, Ash and Nate, there wasn't really *anyone* he could count as a friend. There were always a few hired hands at the Open Skye, but Cam wasn't able to pay them enough to stay for longer than a season or two. They were mostly young, and he'd spend a year training them up, and then they'd move on to make more money someplace else... sometimes even at the Double-S. In fact, he saw his two current hands—they'd ridden into town together yesterday—lounging in front of a makeshift bar, trying to gain the attention of an overworked whore. Cam changed direction then, not wanting to draw their attention

When the bonfires started, Cam moseyed in that direction, still not sure how he felt about the outcome of the basket auction. He saw the Barkers, but they were socializing with the Selkirks and Carderock, and Cam just couldn't bring himself to join them. Instead, he found an enterprising old man with a beer barrel, and laid down a coin for a glass. He stood back from the crowd and the fire, watching the shadows play across the faces of people he didn't know, and wondering if the beer was making him maudlin. He had another glass nonetheless, and thought about his life.

He was a few years shy of thirty. He busted his tail every day, almost dawn 'til dusk, and had a fine spread to show for it. But it wasn't enough, and wouldn't be enough, not 'til he had someone to share it with. He thought that someone had been Serena, but Da was

right; she would never fit into his rough life on the Open Skye.

Yeah, it must be the beer making him mawkish. He finished off the glass, shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans, and started walking. He ambled around the outside of the circle of partyers, far enough away that the fiddle music and light were both faint. He stepped around celebrating couples, fighting dogs, and drunken men, and began to think about finding someplace to spend the night. It had been a disappointing day; the food had been worth the ride, but he suspected that he would have been happier without the day's epiphanies. He silently scoffed at himself. It'd be stupid to continue to mope after Serena. It was better to have realized what he did about his feelings for her *now*, rather than later. Still, it hadn't been his favorite day in recent memory, and he was looking forward to putting it behind him.

When he heard the crying, he thought it was a lost dog or hurt animal. After all, the kids were all running around in clusters much closer to the excitement; he hadn't seen any up close since he reached the bonfire. So he was cautious when he moved towards the small, huddled shadow, which was whimpering softly. He got close enough to see that it was a child.

"Hey, kid. What's wrong?" He kept his voice low and friendly.

"Mr. MacLeod?" It was barely a sniffle, but Cam recognized him, and dropped to his haunches.

"Noah? Are you okay? Why aren't you with your family? Where's Pete?"

"Dunno."

"Are you hurt?"

"Uh-huh."

"Where?"

The kid stuck out his leg, and Cam could see that he had fallen or something, and ripped up his pants. He didn't know how bad it was, but Noah seemed pretty distraught. He carefully manipulated the leg, and breathed a sigh of relief. "It's alright, buddy. Looks like a scratch. I'll bet it hurt a lot, though, huh?" He saw Noah nod somberly. "Well, how about we get you back to your mother, and have her look at it?"

The kid put his arms up, and Cam swung him up onto his shoulders. He heard Noah's little giggle, and felt a pair of small hands digging into his scalp for balance, and was glad to know the kid wasn't too badly hurt. He'd probably been terrified, though, so far out into the darkness, with strangers and animals and funny noises.

Cam pursed his lips and whistled jauntily as he slowly made his way back towards the fires. Soon he felt Noah bouncing along happily to the tune. They reached the crowd, and Cam started weaving in between the revelers, making his way towards the last place he'd seen

the Barkers.

It was almost a half-hour after he'd scooped the boy up that he reached the place, but there was no one there. With Noah still firmly perched on his shoulders—and apparently feeling much better—he slowly turned in a full circle, peering into the shadows. His back was to the fire when he heard a woman's voice cry out “Ash? *Noah?*” and then Molly was running towards them.

She didn't stop when she realized he wasn't her husband—although they had a similar size and build, and he understood the confusion in the low light—but just uttered his name in a short, sharp cry. She almost barreled into him, and he braced himself, since she wasn't a tiny woman. But at the last minute she reached up and tore her son off of his shoulders, crushing the boy to her. Annie was breathless when she arrived, but soon she was stroking the boy's hair and making crooning noises.

There were tear streaks on Molly's face when she finally turned it to Cam, but her joy and relief were palpable. “We've been so worried about him, Cam. *Thank you.*”

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans, a little embarrassed by her sincerity. “I found him on the far side of the clearing. Looks like he scratched up his leg, but he seems fine now.” Molly couldn't seem to loosen her hold on Noah to examine his injury. In fact, she just seemed to hug him harder.

Cam heard the horses before Nate spoke, and he whirled to see the young man leading two animals at a trot. Nate was breathless when he skidded to a halt, seeing Noah in Molly's arms. “You found him! That's great! I borrowed these guys in case we needed to expand our search, but—”

Ash almost knocked his brother aside in his hurry to get to his wife and son. Peter was with him, and threw his arms around his mother's waist and brother's legs, as if he just needed the reminder that they were both okay. Cam couldn't help but smile at the reunion, pleased he was able to set their minds at ease a little.

But then another voice jarred him out of their relief. “Where's Serena?” Carderock had joined them, coming from the other direction. He didn't look at Cam, but peered behind the reunited family.

Molly looked up, and then around. Cam thought she seemed dazed. “She was here when Pete told us Noah was missing. Didn't she go with you?”

Nate, Ash and Carderock exchanged glances and shook their heads. Nate spoke up, “Sebastian and I made loops around the fires. Ash took Pete. We thought she was with you.”

Annie made a series of gestures, but Cam had never bothered to learn her language of signs. Molly translated. “She was gone by

when?" Annie signed again. "By the time Nate left?"

Carderock stepped forward and took Annie by the shoulders. His gaze was serious, direct, when he asked the girl "Where did she go, then?" Annie shrugged helplessly. He swore and released her. Spinning around, he grabbed the reins of one of the horses Nate led, and pulled himself into the saddle. Without another word to any of them, he clucked at the animal and cantered into the darkness. Cam heard him occasionally calling Serena's name.

Ash looked like he had to force himself to let go of his family, and made to take the other horse. Cam stopped him. "I'll go."

"Don't be stupid."

He shrugged. "I'm not. You and Nate get your family comfortable. I'll go get Carderock."

"What about Serena?"

Cam turned towards the darkness, south of the clearing, south of the city. "What's out that way?"

"Crow Creek."

He sighed. "That's what I was afraid of. Does Serena know the area?"

Molly spoke up, "I don't think so. She rarely comes down here. She must have been frantic to head out there, if that's where she is."

"Hopefully she's not. Maybe she went to find her aunts without us noticing?"

Cam secretly agreed with Ash; Serena had no call to be plunging wildly into the darkness. He figured she'd slipped unheeded among the crowds to search, and he was heading on a goose chase after a man he didn't much care for.

Taking the reins from Nate, he swung up onto the animal, and noted with some disgust that Carderock had taken the horse with the Winchester in the saddle boot. He was left defenseless, relying on catching up to the dandy to get the rifle back.

He sighed, "If there's any chance she's out there, we have to look. You all keep looking around here for her. I'll bet she'll turn up, and if she's out there, I'll find her."

Ash nodded to his wife. "We need to tell Agnes and Agatha, and get these kids into bed. Nate and I will keep looking."

Cam nodded to let them know that he understood, and urged the horse out into the darkness. He was pretty sure he'd find Carderock pinned beneath his lamed animal, the way the fool had ridden carelessly into a landscape full of holes and rocks. And so, shaking his head, he urged his horse into a careful trot, and occasionally called Carderock's name. No man deserved to die out here, alone, no matter if he *had* just won the woman Cam had always thought he'd loved.

## CHAPTER TEN



Sebastian had always thought of himself as a rational person. He was a *math* teacher, for crying out loud! That was practically the *definition* of ‘rational’. But plunging headlong into an unfamiliar landscape on a strange horse, in the pitch black...? That seemed pretty crazy, now that he took the time to actually *think* about it. But he didn’t stop, didn’t turn back towards safety, for the same reason he hadn’t in the first place.

Serena was out there, in trouble, and he had to find her. Not just for her sake, either; he had a visceral, gut-wrenching *need* to know that she was safe, and the only way to be sure of that was to have her with him. He had no proof that she was even out here; that she hadn’t gone looking for Noah amid the crowd, as he had. But if she *was* out here, then he needed to be the one to make sure that she was safe.

Somewhere during that long, featureless ride away from civilization, he came to an important realization. He loved Serena. He loved her gentleness, her generosity, her delicateness. He loved the way she cared so strongly that she’d ignore her own safety in a frantic search for a child. He loved the way he felt when he was with her, and the way she made him feel. He loved everything about her.

Yeah, he loved her alright, and he was terrified by it. Terrified at the thought of losing her before he could tell her how he felt, and how she made him feel. He had to find her.

“*Serena!*” He was bellowing, actually bellowing. That rational part of him that had remained detached, that was watching his actions, vaguely wondered if he’d ever bellowed before. But he was too consumed with panic, with passion, to care. He’d been calling her name for what seemed like hours—but he knew it’d only been minutes since he’d taken the reins from Nate and ridden blindly out—and his only response had been the sighing of a dry wind.

Until now. “*Carderock!* Dammit, man, slow down!” MacLeod’s voice was still faint, but Sebastian reined in his horse. His tension must have been obvious, though, because the animal paced nervously while they waited for the other rider.

MacLeod trotted out of the darkness with a scowl on his face, but that was nothing new. Sebastian had seen the way the other man had

looked at Serena, but he wasn't about to allow anyone to come between him and the woman he loved. "What is it?" He knew he was barking, but didn't bother with niceties, not when Serena needed him.

"You've been riding hell-for-leather, couldn't hear me calling."

"Well, now I do. What do you want?"

There was enough of a moon for Sebastian to see MacLeod's scowl deepen. "It was stupid of you to go off like that. You're lucky your horse isn't lamed, and you thrown."

Sebastian just shrugged. He hadn't thought of the dangers to himself and the animal, but didn't think they would have mattered to him in his hurry to find her. "Did you follow me to insult me, or to help me find Serena?"

"What makes you think she was dumb enough to come out here?"

Sebastian bristled. "She *loves* Noah, and you saw how panicked Molly was. She was probably just as frantic, and not thinking clearly. Maybe she *is* back in the crowd, but if she's not, I need to find her before something bad happens to her."

MacLeod's horse reared slightly in response. "Happens to *her*? She was raised here, you Eastern dandy! You're the one that's likely to die out here!" He was yelling, and Sebastian wasn't sure why the other man was so angry, but he yelled right back.

"What do you care?"

"I don't! You can break your neck for all it matters to me! But I don't want to have to be the one to drag your body back to Serena and let her see you dead. It would break her heart!"

Sebastian opened his mouth to retort, but closed it again thoughtfully. MacLeod must know—maybe even understand—how he felt about Serena. But it seemed like the other man was acknowledging Serena had feelings for *him*. And equally revealing was the fact that MacLeod didn't want her to be hurt. Cam wasn't going to win her—that punch had guaranteed that—and Sebastian couldn't afford to hold a grudge, not if he wanted Cam's help.

So he just said "Fine. You can make sure I don't die stupidly. You *are* going to help me look for her, aren't you?"

The blonde man nudged his horse beside Sebastian's, until they sat knee-to-knee. Sebastian had never thought of himself as a small man, but MacLeod was a full head taller than him. He scowled, to let the rancher know he wasn't going to be intimidated by something as superficial as height.

"Yeah, I'll help. But first, give me the rifle."

"No." Sebastian's response was instinctual, born of a desire to remain armed in this unfamiliar and dangerous territory.

MacLeod gestured impatiently. "I'm not about to trot after you on a wild goose chase, unarmed."

Dropping his hand to the Winchester in the boot on the saddle, Sebastian scowled. “But you expect *me* to?”

“Yeah, because you don’t have a clue what you’re doing. I do, so I want the rifle.”

Both men were facing the same way, their backs to the faint glow of Cheyenne in the far distance. The meager moonlight illuminated a stand of trees maybe four hundred feet away, the gnarled and bent form of a dead cottonwood on the far right. Sebastian nodded towards it, “See that tree? See that branch about ten feet up?”

MacLeod turned, and Sebastian smoothly slipped the rifle out of the leather, aimed, and pulled the trigger. The pistol cartridges meant that the Winchester had less recoil than the rifles he’d grown up using at his family’s hunting lodge, and with a *crack* the limb was sheared off neatly. He didn’t look towards the other man, but instead just reholstered the rifle, clucked to his horse, and moved forward again, into the vague Wyoming landscape.



Cam was impressed, despite himself. Sure, it wasn’t a particularly hard shot—he could’ve easily made it from over twice the distance—but the fact that the dandy had made it was pretty remarkable. He urged his horse after Carderock’s, and thought that maybe he was going to have to re-evaluate his opinion of the man. He dressed like a citified dude, sure, but Cam was beginning to suspect there was more to him than that. He had an impressive handshake, and was pretty good with a rifle, which was surprising in such a refined gentleman. And while Carderock obviously wasn’t completely at home on a horse’s back, he hadn’t fallen off or been thrown or made any of the hundreds of dumb mistakes beginners usually made.

Yeah, Sebastian Carderock just might make it out here in Wyoming Territory, after all. And as much as he hated to admit it, Cam had lied when he said he didn’t care if the other man broke his fool neck. Sebastian Carderock wasn’t anything like the ranchers Cam knew; he was urbane and sophisticated, educated and wealthy. But it would take all kinds to make Wyoming into a state, and maybe they needed people like him too.

Both men heard the creek—rushing fiercely from all the rain they’d had in the past week—before they saw it. But the horses pulled up short, snorting and pawing the ground nervously. Carderock swung down, and taking the reins, stepped forward a few paces. Cam heard him curse and drop to one knee, so he followed.

They were on a steep embankment overlooking Crow Creek. It wasn’t so far from the fairgrounds and bonfire that someone—



particularly a frantic young woman—couldn't have run the distance. And if she'd stood here and saw the swiftly flowing water, and realized how easy it'd be for a little kid to tumble down and be pulled under, Cam could imagine that she wouldn't be paying particular attention to where she put her feet.

Which was the problem. Because about a foot in front of Carderock's knee, the embankment sheared off suddenly, a great ugly scar in the dirt. They could both see the mud piled below, and knew what it meant. Recently—*very* recently—someone had stood here, putting too much weight on the fragile knit of land. The bank had given away and dropped her into the swift water below.

Both men peered downstream, searching in vain for anything to indicate that she was safe. But they saw nothing. Cam glanced down, and caught the unabashed anguish and fear on Carderock's face. For the first time since losing the auction, Cam was suddenly at peace with the outcome. Serena wasn't the woman for him, as much as he'd hoped she would be. But this man... This man really *loved* her, and not in the superficial way Cam had always felt about her. Sebastian Carderock had plunged unthinkingly into unfamiliar territory on an unfamiliar animal, because there was a *chance* Serena had come this way. Yeah, he loved her alright.

So Cam put out his hand for the other man to grasp, and pulled him to his feet. Cam squeezed his hand, not in rivalry like the day before, but in comfort.

"We'll find her, Carderock. We'll find her."

The other man's face was shadowed, but Cam felt dark eyes studying him. "Under the circumstances, just make it 'Sebastian'."

Cam nodded, one corner of his mouth turning up. "Sebastian, then. Call me 'Cam'."

Sebastian nodded, and shook his hand once more. "Do you think this river's shallow enough to ford?"

"This thing's just a creek, but I'll admit it's running faster than usual. Still, it shouldn't be a problem for a horse this tall." He eyeballed Sebastian's fine suit, but in the interest of not upsetting their fragile alliance, he didn't question the man's riding ability. "I'll cross. We can each take one bank, and head downstream."

"I'll take the opposite side. No need for you to ruin good boots over my impetuosity." Cam almost laughed at that; his boots had seen much better days, and were used to all sorts of abuse out on the range. But Sebastian mounted up and urged his horse down the fallen embankment and into Crow Creek. Cam watched as he competently forded the deepest part of the creek, and man and horse emerged dripping to scramble up the opposite bank. Sebastian raised his hand to Cam, to let him know that he was fine, and then turned

downstream. He didn't say anything, and Cam wondered if he was already thinking ahead to what they might find.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



Serena flopped onto her back, struggling to breathe in the tight bodice. She'd lost her heavy outer skirt already, but it still felt like she'd never be able to take a full breath again.

While she was lying there, staring up at the stars, sure that she was dying, she decided to take the time to berate herself for her stupidity. Oh, not about leaving the safety of civilization in a desperate attempt to find Noah; she knew that while it was unlikely he'd gotten lost out in the wilderness, even the slight chance he was needed to be investigated. And every second he was out here meant more danger to a tiny child. So when she'd heard he was missing, she immediately turned to look for him in the most threatening direction. She knew there was a creek south of the city, and knew that it'd be rushing after all the rain, and wanted to make sure that he didn't make it that far. Luckily, she'd seen no trace of him during her frantic search, and was relieved to be able to turn back towards the bonfire, after checking the banks one more time.

No, what she was scolding herself for was her willful disregard of years of lessons learned from living in the Wyoming wilderness. She *knew* those banks were dangerous, with the water constantly eroding dirt and supports. She *knew* that she was at least a mile from anyone who'd hear her call, without a horse or any protection. And yet she'd stood there on that high ridge, and called Noah's name one last time, hoping she wouldn't see any sign of him.

And then she'd felt the earth move, had bruised her forehead on her tumble down the hill, and had just enough time to utter a *very* unladylike word before the water closed over her head. It felt like hours that she fought to reach the surface, being tumbled every which way. The bump on the head hadn't helped; she was disoriented, and most of the time not even sure which way was up. The water wasn't that deep, but when she was able to touch the bottom, the current swept her off her feet again. In one terrifying instance, her foot got stuck under a large rock while the water pushed her head under, and she was sure she was going to drown before she struggled free again.

Realizing that her heavy skirts were the reason she couldn't make any headway against the current—not that she had any idea how to

swim—she'd managed to thrash her way towards a partially submerged tree. The branches scratched her face and neck, but she held on tightly with one hand, and freed herself from her skirt and bustle with the other. The sunny dress had always been one of her favorites, but she was desperate. She was just breathing a sigh of relief when her hand slipped and she went downstream once more.

But this time it was easier to scrabble towards the bank without the extra deadweight of the heavy material. Luckily, the creek widened and the water slowed sufficiently for her to claw and lurch her way towards the muddy bank. And now she lay there, filthy and exhausted and disoriented, not sure how far she'd come, or how far she was from Cheyenne, but knowing that she was on the wrong side of the creek. If she wanted to have any hope of getting back home, she was going to have to cross that hateful stream again.

That's why she was berating herself; had she not been foolish enough to stand on that edge, she wouldn't now be half-dead, miles from civilization, hours from daylight, amid untold dangers. And she *still* couldn't breathe!

Tears started to gather, and she tried to will them away, but they blurred out the stars anyhow. She gasped, thinking that crying was the last thing she needed right now. Right now, she needed to be strong, to think analytically; but she could feel what little control she'd regained slipping away. She wanted to be home in her bed, or back at the barbecue. She wanted to be in Sebastian's arms again. She wanted to feel his strength, his presence, his lips. She wanted him here with her, which was a stupid wish, because then *he'd* be in this mess too.

Apparently she was also delirious, or had hit her head harder than she'd thought, because after a while of lying there, trying to talk herself into at least moving her legs out of the water, she swore she heard a voice. And not just any voice: *his* voice. And he was calling her name, which was frankly, ridiculous. Couldn't she have more reasonable hallucinations? Oh dear, maybe she had a concussion.

But the voice didn't go away; in fact, it got closer. It *was* someone calling her name, and it *did* sound like Sebastian. Serena decided to stay right where she was, certain that any movement would jar her already-unstable perception of the world, and send her into another spell of disorientation.

It was a dark night, and the stars were particularly bright. She watched them twinkle, and thought about the way Sebastian had immediately offered to help look for Noah. He was a good man, an honorable man, and was it any wonder she was in love with him? She should have mentioned where she was going before she slipped away; then *someone* would at least know where to look for her. Instead she was lying here, half in the water, arms splayed, on some muddy bank

far from home, listening to a hallucination call her name. Oh, and she was half-naked.

All-in-all, a lousy ending to a beautiful evening.

Then she heard a noise from the bank above her, the bank she'd earlier determined was too high for her to climb in her present state. She tilted her head back so that she could look up to the ridge, and heard an animal snort. Suddenly, a horrible apparition appeared; it was long and skinny, with hair sticking out everywhere. She opened her mouth to scream, but only a little squeak came out. The thing said "Serena? Serena!" in Sebastian's voice, and split in half. Right before she surrendered to blessed darkness, she realized that she'd been looking—upside down—at a man sitting on a horse, and that Sebastian *had* come to rescue her.



"Hey, Cam! I found her!" Sebastian could barely get the words past his huge smile, and he hoped his companion heard him. The other man was still a ways behind, having stopped to investigate a partially submerged tree, a likely looking spot for a half-drowned woman to cling to. Hopefully he would be catching up soon, because there was no telling how much help Sebastian would need with Serena. She was alive—that frightened squeak had confirmed it—but she'd gone limp and unmoving.

Sebastian swung down from the horse, and looped the reins around a bush to keep the animal from wandering off. Serena had washed up on a muddy beach below a four-foot drop-off; Sebastian was careful to make sure it was more stable than the original embankment, the one that'd caused so much trouble. Deciding that the danger the little cliff offered was minimal, Sebastian easily jumped down, and squatted beside her in the mud.

She was soaking wet, with a large lump on her temple. Yes, she was bedraggled and pitiful-looking, and he didn't think he'd ever seen anything more beautiful in his life. The reflected starlight seemed to make her pale skin and hair glow silver, and caused the bruise to stand out. But thank God, Serena was alive and breathing, and when he touched her cheek, she gave a little moan. Sebastian scooped her up in his arms, careful to tuck her face into the crook of his neck. She weighed so little, but was so important.

He wasn't able to climb the embankment while holding her, and he couldn't make himself put her down. He sloshed through the shallows until he came to a more moderate slope, and climbed it with minimal difficulty. At the top, he took the time to study her, to ensure that she was still safe. Her bodice seemed rather tight, so he loosened it as best

as he could, smiling smugly at the way her pale skin pimpled when his knuckles brushed against it. Yes, her clothing was all ripped up, but she was breathing fine, and seemed quite comfortable in his arms... which was nice, because *he* was immeasurably comfortable with her right where she was.

He heard his name being called, and turned to see Cam reining in on the opposite bank. He hadn't wanted to yell, to disturb her, but he had no other choice. "I've got her. I'm going to start a fire or something."

She moaned again—probably at his shout—and he forgot all about the other man. Sebastian moved further away from the creek, and found a patch of grass on which to lay her. He wished the moon was brighter, so he could check her for other wounds, but a fire would have to do. Luckily, firewood was plentiful along the banks of the creek, and he was able to collect a pile without moving too far away from her.

He heard her thrash about, and dropped his second armful of sticks to go to her. Her moans were louder, and she seemed to be anxious to protect her head. He was holding her, stroking her hair and whispering comforting nonsense words, when Cam rode his horse up and out of the creek, just as wet as Sebastian had been. He swung down, and asked "How bad is she?"

"Not too bad, I don't think. She's got a knot on her head, but she was awake when I found her."

"Then what's wrong with her?"

Sebastian couldn't help his smile. "She fainted when she saw me."

"Well," Cam shrugged, "who could blame her?"

Eyes narrowed, Sebastian asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Cam was busy arranging the kindling, and starting a fire, but Sebastian could hear the grin in his voice when he replied, "You don't exactly look like Prince Charming anymore, Carderock. You lost your hat."

Sebastian burst into laughter, and didn't even bother quieting when Serena started to squirm from the noise. He just laughed louder, relieved to be able to release some of the tension from the last few hours. He was so happy that she was safe, and in his arms, that he couldn't seem to help himself. Imagine, if his mother could see him now! Wet, muddy, bedraggled, and holding a half-dressed woman in the middle of nowhere... Cam was right; he was no longer the man who wooed Serena so devoutly. But he didn't care; she was his, and he loved her, and he'd move Heaven and Earth again to keep her safe.

Cam was squatting beside the now-roaring fire, watching him bemusedly. "If you're done cackling, want me to check on her?"

"Absolutely not." Sebastian grinned, but there was no way he'd let

another man—especially *this* other man—touch her in her current state. He made himself relax his arms, to draw her away from his chest, and was surprised to see her staring up at him, those lovely violet eyes hooded in the darkness.

“I love your laugh, Sebastian.” Her voice was the merest whisper, and he forgot all about asking after her health. Her first words after her ordeal were about loving him? He dropped a kiss to her forehead, and then another on her lips. It was chaste and over quickly, but just as warm as the first.

As he pulled away, he felt her arching to keep the contact, and grinned against her lips. He softened his refusal with another gentle peck on her nose. “There will be more, my love, but later.” He felt, more than saw, her blush.

“Who were you talking to?” He liked the fact that she hadn’t tried to squirm out of his arms to see for herself. Sebastian lifted her a bit so that she could turn her head.

Cam pulled his hat off, and balanced it on one knee. “Howdy, Miss Serena.”

“Oh, Cam!” She struggled to sit up by herself, then, using one shaking hand to brush a lock of silver out of her eyes. She seemed flustered, and Sebastian wondered if she’d be equally uncomfortable had it been someone beside Cam who’d accompanied him on his wild dash.

So, keeping one hand behind her back to support her in case she was still weak, he explained. “Cam found Noah, on the far side of the celebration.” He felt, more than heard, her sigh of relief. “When he brought the boy back, we realized you were gone. I wasn’t exactly thinking straight—” the understatement of the year, “but I grabbed a horse and tore out here after you. Cam must have thought to save me from my own folly, because he caught up with me, and we found the place where you fell in Crow Creek. He’s been searching just as diligently as I have.”

Her hand had found his in the dark, and she clutched it now. Still, she nodded to Cam. “Thank you. Thank you both for coming to find me. It was foolish of me to be so careless, but I was so worried about Noah, and afraid he might have fallen in accidentally. But to stand there, when I knew the dangers...!” She shook her head, as if disgusted with herself, but quickly gasped and fingered the lump on her forehead. The rest of her self-recrimination was muffled. “Well, it was stupid of me.”

Sebastian gently moved her fingers away from her head, and turned her face towards the fire. “Tell us?” he murmured while he examined the bruise, and determined that there was little they could do that the water hadn’t already done for her. If the bump hadn’t been

enough to knock her unconscious, then it probably wasn't that bad.

Meanwhile, she told them of falling into the water, of knocking her head, of her disorientation. It sounded like she fought the water for a long time, before catching up on a downed tree—maybe the one Cam had been examining?—to remove her skirts. Sebastian had noticed, of course, that she wasn't wearing anything over her bloomers, and assumed something similar had happened. She was decently covered, even without the skirts, but he couldn't help but admire her trim ankles and calves. He helped her remove her stockings, to hang them near the fire on sticks, and loosen her bodice even more. He liked that she didn't seem to mind him touching her so intimately.

Cam was feeding the fire, listening to her story, and trying to dry off as best as he could. "Sounds like you must've gotten washed around pretty good. We've been looking for almost two hours. It's after midnight."

"I don't know. I guess so. My head certainly hurt, and it seemed like it lasted forever. But I think maybe I was just floating for a while." Sebastian wrapped his arm around her, and gently kissed the small lump on her head. She snuggled closer to him, and he hid his smile. Cam looked away. "Is it really that late? I'm so sorry to have caused you both this trouble, to keep you from the celebrations. It's too late now to go back to Cheyenne."

"Not the first night I've spent on the range," Cam mumbled, still not looking at her. Sebastian guessed the other man still hadn't gotten over losing Serena. Of course, Sebastian hadn't 'won' her yet, exactly, but he had every intention of doing so, and Cam must have known that he didn't stand a chance.

"There's no need to apologize, love." Sebastian kissed her again, just because he could, and liked the way she melted against him. "You showed true selflessness in searching for Noah, and the least I—we—could do was help you."

"But to spend the night out here in the middle of nowhere...?"

"Hardly the first time I've been camping, Serena." He heard Cam snort, and grinned in response. Did the other man not believe him? So be it.

"Camping?" It did his heart good to hear her chuckle. "Usually 'campers' are better prepared, Sebastian."

"Nevertheless, we'll make do." He squeezed her. "Truthfully, I'm less concerned about our provisions, and more concerned about your reputation."

"Her reputation?" Cam whirled to face them.

"A single woman, spending the night with two single men, I mean."

She scoffed. "No one will talk! You two are my friends, and friends



of my family. No one will suspect anything untoward..." The bravado was at odds with the way she chewed on her lip. "...will they?" she finished hopefully.

Cam's fists were balled by his side. "They might. They know what happened at the basket auction."

Serena pulled slightly out of Sebastian's arms. "*Oh dear.*" She swallowed, and gripped her hands in front of her. He winced, sorry now that he'd said anything. She'd been through so much in the last few hours, and the last thing she needed was more of a headache. This situation would have meant social ruin to a woman in New York's society, but maybe things were different out here. The church ladies who ran things seemed to be sticklers for propriety, but maybe they were more understanding of extenuating circumstances? Of course, Cam would know better than he, and the other man had agreed with Sebastian's concern.

Cam voice was harsh. "What can we do?"

Sebastian sighed, and ran his free hand through his hair, feeling the longer strands fall back against his forehead. "Where I come from, there'd really be only one thing *to* do." He paused, suddenly realizing that the situation might actually be beneficial to him.

"What?" Cam snapped.

"She'll have to get married."

"Married?" Her whisper was faint.

"To one of us."

"Oh."

She didn't sound devastated. In fact, she sounded a little breathless. Was it possible that she was thinking about marriage to him? He wanted to smile, but didn't think it'd be appropriate. He loved this woman, and even though she hadn't said as much, he could guess that she loved him. He wanted her more than any other woman he'd ever met, and he *would* marry her. This little adventure was just a convenient excuse.

Cam, it seemed, still thought that he might have a chance. The big blonde man stood ramrod-straight, fists by his side, silhouetted by the fire. The light seemed to give him an unnatural golden glow that disconcerted Sebastian a bit. The man was impressive, there was no doubt about it. "Well," Cam's voice broke, and he cleared his throat to cover it. "You know how I feel, Serena. I offered for you last month, and my offer still stands. I'll marry you."

Flustered, she tried to stand, but got tangled in Sebastian's legs. He helped her up, concerned that she was still weak. She looked so small; arms wrapped tightly around her middle, without all the fripperies and protections of modern fashion. Her pale hair hung long down her back, and seemed to reflect what little moonlight there was; if Cam

glowed gold in the firelight, Serena was a brilliant silver.

She started to say something, but seemed to think better of it, and shut her mouth slowly. Bright eyes searched his out in the darkness, and his heart leapt at the need he saw there. He hoped he understood what she was asking, and straightened.

Cam wanted her, yes, but Sebastian *would* have her. He'd always gotten what he wanted, once he put his mind to it. And he couldn't have been more pleased with the situation forcing her hand than if he'd planned it himself. Still, these sorts of things should be handled delicately.

He took one of her small hands in his, and sank to one knee before her. Was it his imagination, or did she seem to glow brighter suddenly? She raised delicate fingers to her lips, as if to stifle a gasp, and watched him with wide eyes. "Serena, I fell in love with Cheyenne when I arrived. It's nothing like what I left, but so much more exciting. And then I found something else to keep me here, and I was captivated. I want to stay here with you. I want to build you a mansion and escort you to church and the opera and your charity functions. I want to teach beside you at the Charter School. I want to help this city and her citizens achieve the potential I know is there. I want to build a life here. With you. I will do everything and anything I can possibly imagine to make you happy, if only you'll agree to become my wife. I would be the luckiest man alive if you'll marry me, Serena."

She was crying. Actually crying. He wanted to remember that, so he could tell their children. He imagined himself bouncing a beautiful little silver-haired girl on one knee, explaining how her mother was so overcome with love for him that she cried when he proposed. He couldn't help but smile at the fancy, and the way her fingers shook when she wiped the tears away.

But she didn't say anything. At all. No "Yes, I'll marry you, Sebastian!" No "I love you". None of the things he'd assumed—hoped!—she would say when he proposed marriage to her. In fact, she gently pulled her hand free of his, and took a step away from him. Her face was a mask of misery as she gripped her hands together in front of her bosom. The tears had stopped, but she still looked down on him, kneeling in the Wyoming dirt, with such despondency that he desperately wanted to leap up, to go to her. Only the thought that *he'd* caused her sorrow with his marriage proposal checked the impulse. Somehow, he was responsible for her unhappiness.

"Serena?" He whispered, because he didn't think he could speak then. His throat was so tight, he felt like he was being choked.

She tried to say something, but turned away from the fire as two more fat tears worked from under her lashes. They stood like three

statues in the fire's glow, until finally she croaked out "Thank you for your offers. I think we should all get some rest."

And that was that. Sebastian slowly stood up, and glanced towards Cam, but the other man had turned back towards the fire. Serena didn't say anything further, and in fact sat down on the far side of the blaze, her arms wrapped around herself. Sebastian hung his jacket over her shoulders; although she pulled it tight, she didn't say anything to him.

Soon after, they were all stretched out on the ground, well apart from one another. Sebastian was trying to figure out what had happened so quickly to foul the situation. He'd been so *sure* that she'd happily accept his proposal. What happened?

For the first time in... well, in *ever*, Sebastian was unsure. He knew what he wanted, and he thought he'd known how to get it. He loved her, and wanted to marry her... and she'd bawled when he'd suggested it. Maybe he was wrong about her feelings for him? Maybe she didn't care as much as he did about her? Maybe she really *did* prefer Cam? Sebastian tried to scoff away the insecurities, but even he had to admit that the other man was everything he thought of when he thought of a cowboy. He was tall and broad and Sebastian supposed he could be considered handsome. But anyone who spent any time with Serena knew that she wouldn't be happy living out on the range for the rest of her life, no matter how handsome her husband was. No, Cam MacLeod wasn't the man for her.

But did *she* know that? Why else would she not want to be married to Sebastian? Why else cry and refuse to answer when he'd proposed? What else was he not seeing, not understanding?

He laid there, his hands stacked behind his head, and thought of where he wanted his life to go. As sure as the stars above, he wanted Serena to be a part of it. He would prefer it to be here in Cheyenne, with the city's endless possibilities, but he'd take her wherever she wanted to reside. But how could he achieve that goal, if she turned down his offer of marriage? Why wouldn't she want to be his wife? What was wrong with him?

He sighed, hating the uncertainty. He wasn't willing to give up, not at all. Carderocks didn't give up. It was practically their family motto. He would talk to her tomorrow, to find a way to figure out what she was thinking, why she had been so upset at his offer. And then, once he heard her objections, he'd address them all.

And *then* she'd marry him, by God.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



She woke, wrapped in his scent. Serena was confused for a long moment. The ground was hard beneath her, and it took a while to remember last night's adventure, how she'd ended up sleeping on the packed Wyoming dirt. They'd found a blanket in one of the saddlebags, and Sebastian had laid it out for her. It was a balmy night, and while she hadn't needed the rough wool for warmth, she'd appreciated the slight cushion it'd offered. It was her first experience sleeping outside, and it hadn't been particularly pleasant.

But Sebastian's jacket had somehow made it all okay. Having the soft cotton wrapped around her was nice enough that she could pretend it was his arms engulfing her. It had been such a heart-breakingly beautiful feeling that she'd found herself crying again, deep into the night. Crying because as much as she wanted to marry him, as much as her heart had leapt when he'd gotten down on one knee, she couldn't. She'd wanted to say 'yes', had started to, but there was still the Double-S to consider.

Cam had reminded her of his proposal, but she knew she could never marry him. He was just as rough as her father had been, and had proved that on Sunday when he'd struck Sebastian. She would never be happy married to him. But Sebastian, as much as she loved him, wasn't the man for her father's ranch. Her husband would have to live on the Double-S, pouring his heart-and-soul into it to keep it running. She could see Cam doing *that*, but her heart sunk to imagine *herself* in that life. The life she wanted was with Sebastian in Cheyenne, not out here in this wilderness, with the dirt and the animals and the danger.

She kept coming back to the possibility of selling the ranch. But Cam could never afford it, and finding another buyer would take time. Maybe, if she accepted Sebastian's proposal, she could sell the Double-S for less than it was worth, and rely on her new husband to keep her and her aunts in style? But that would make her feel like she was trading herself for a place in civilized society; she'd worked hard at something she disliked to be able to support the three of them. The ideal solution would be to sell the ranch to someone who would work it the way it deserved—the way her father had wanted—and *then* be

able to marry Sebastian. But the way things stood now, it was a longshot.

Serena knew that she was pouting when she sat up and hugged Sebastian's jacket around her shoulders. It was unladylike, but she figured that she was entitled. She hadn't slept well, had woken up several times crying silent tears for the life she couldn't have, and must look like something Caesar or Calpurnia had dragged home.

"Hungry?" Cam was offering her a stick of what turned out to be jerky. She took it, and smiled wanly at his gruff attempts at politeness. He was handsome and kind, but just so... so coarse. He lacked sophistication, and even his civility was strained. He didn't bother asking after her health, although she did catch him eying her askance, and she made an unconscious effort to straighten her hair. She gave up when she realized that she'd lost all of her pins in the creek, and had to be content with pulling it over one shoulder. Between her unbound hair, her lack of skirts, and her general dishabille, she must look like a fallen woman. How utterly mortifying, to be seen by one's beaux in such a situation. She blushed, and tried to pull the jacket closer, to block Cam's view of any skin. Sebastian's gaze, for some reason, didn't bother her, and she wondered why.

The beau in question was squatting on the opposite side of the cold fire, which had burnt out sometime during the night. His shirt was open, and she could see a shadow of hair at the base of the triangle of skin it revealed. His position accentuated the muscles in his haunches and thighs, and she blushed to be caught looking at such an intimate area. His dark gaze was intent on her, his hair disheveled and wild. She should have been uncomfortable with his unwavering gaze, but instead, his attention made her breathless. He was like some kind of wild animal, waiting to pounce, and she was his prey. She felt her pulse speed up as she met his eyes, and had to lick suddenly dry lips. What was it about this man that made her feel so special? It was a magnetism, and she didn't know if he was even aware of it.

His expression was blank, but she couldn't forget the look of hurt on his face the night before, right before she'd turned away from him. Hurt that she hadn't said yes? Hurt that she hadn't responded at all? She never intended to cause him pain, but couldn't think of a simple way to explain her feelings. Couldn't think much at all, with her head pounding as hard as it had been. But he had deserved an answer, and she hadn't had the decency to give him one.

"I'm sorry." It was less a whisper, and more just her lips forming the words. She knew that he saw her apology—he was staring dagger-straight at her face—but he didn't respond or acknowledge it. His expression didn't change; he just continued to stare at her.

She was suddenly terrified that she'd caused irreparable damage.

Had she hurt him so much with her lack of response that he was now regretting the offer? Was he going to forget about it? She wanted to explain, but couldn't think of how to broach the subject, not with him gazing so impassively at her.

Later, after Cam had re-saddled the horses, the three of them got ready to leave their temporary campsite. The sun was barely up, and they'd each only eaten a few bites of jerky. But last night's barbeque had been plenty, and she still wasn't at all hungry. Besides, Brixley undoubtedly had breakfast waiting for her at home. Her personal needs were more pressing, but she hadn't had an opportunity for any privacy.

Both men swung up on their respective horses, and she took the time to admire Sebastian's surprising ease with the animal. And then both of them held out hands to her, as if inviting her to ride with him. She stood between them, and *knew* that this was a metaphor for the rest of her life. The choice she made now—maybe even that moment—could determine the course of her future.

Luckily, she was saved from her agony. "She's riding with me." Sebastian's voice was curt, clipped, but not rough. He sounded like a man used to taking command. He was glaring at Cam, as if daring him to take issue. They stared at each other for a good minute, before Cam shrugged and clucked his horse down the embankment into Crow Creek.

Still dazed at how easily one of her suitors relinquished the field, she put her hand out to Sebastian. He pulled her up onto the horse easily, and before she was even situated in front of him, started across the creek. She was a little miffed at how effortlessly they crossed atop the horse, after the way she'd battled the water last night, but she knew that the bump on her head had probably contributed to her adventure.

His thighs under her were as hard as the ground had been, but she didn't mind so much. One arm was pressed against her back, holding the reins and supporting her at the same time, and she wanted nothing more at that moment than to lean back against him, to nestle in his embrace like she had the night before. But the memory of his impassive face this morning checked her movement, and she tried her hardest to stay upright, despite the swaying of the horse and Sebastian's alluring warmth.

She thought that she'd go mad, sitting with him, wanting to apologize, wanting to explain, but not knowing if he still wanted her to. He hadn't said anything directly to her since that proposal last night, and she could feel the stiffness and formality radiating from him. But soon her bladder's pressing need dragged her thoughts away from him, and she started to squirm. When he snaked an arm around

her and pulled her up against him, she decided that he was trying to tell her to stop moving. She tried, she really did, but soon the need became too great.

She'd just spotted a stand of bushes and scrub trees along their trail, when he finally spoke. His voice was low, in her ear, and it sent shivers down her spine.

"How's your head?"

She answered instinctually, none of the awkwardness she'd been feeling. "Better, thank you. It still hurts," a result of a night spent silently crying, "but just an ache."

The fingers of his free hand brushed against her forehead, touching the much-diminished lump. "It feels much better."

"Yes," she barely breathed, thrilled by his attention.

"I'm sorry," he cleared his throat, "I'm sorry if what I said last night offended you. It wasn't meant to. I'll admit that I could have been more tactful about the proposition, and it certainly didn't go the way I'd always imagined it, but I didn't intend to hurt you."

*Oh no.* He thought that *he'd* hurt *her*? She'd been so wrong... but then, so was he. She was almost glad that she wasn't able to see his expression when she laid her hand gently on his forearm, and said, "Oh Sebastian! You..." she had to swallow back tears at his pain. "You couldn't be further from the truth. I've..." The tears came then, just when she thought she'd cried them all. "I've been dreaming of you saying just those words to me since the day I met you!"

His forearm was a band of steel around her waist now. "Then *why*..." He didn't finish, but he didn't need to. Serena knew what he meant to say. *Why* didn't she say yes? *Why* did she bawl at the suggestion? She needed to find a way to make him understand her dilemma.

But wrapped in his embrace, perched atop his thighs, surrounded by his heady scent and warm breath, she couldn't find the words. "Please," she managed to choke out, "I need a moment alone." She pointed to the stand of trees ahead, and Sebastian veered towards them, whistling like a schoolboy to catch Cam's attention.

She was openly weeping when she scrambled down from the horse, not even accepting Sebastian's offered help. All she could think of was gaining the privacy of the stand of bushes, and having a few moments to herself. She was pleased to find a small stream, and once she'd cried her way through her ablutions, she took a few moments to rest by the bank, and washed her hands and face again.

She returned to the men dry-eyed, if not refreshed; her back straight, her hands clutched before her, determined to say what needed to be said. They'd both dismounted, and were speaking together beside one of the animals. Cheyenne was probably not more

than a half-hour's ride away—they'd already seen two homesteads, and would start spotting more soon—but Serena thought it better to say what needed saying here and now.

Sebastian hurried towards her, but stopped short of gathering her in his arms. She could tell that he wanted to, and she desperately needed his support... but she couldn't let herself lean on him, not now. She had to find the strength to do this on her own.

Instead, he took one of her hands, and she clutched it like a lifeline. She was still wearing his jacket—she was embarrassed that she had used the sleeves to wipe her eyes so often, and made a mental note to have it cleaned before she returned it—and the wrist fell over their joined hands.

Despite the darkness of his eyes, she'd never thought that they hid his emotions. They were warm and rich, and she loved looking at them. Now, she could see his concern and confusion, and she loved him all the more for it. But he wasn't the one she needed to speak to, not right now.

Unwilling to let Sebastian go, she dragged Sebastian behind her—as much as she could drag anyone half a head taller than her—when she crossed to stand before Cam. She had to tip her head back to see all of him, and inadvertently took a step back. So much had changed since he'd first proposed. She could appreciate his rugged good looks, and his attempts at civility, and knew that he wouldn't hurt her, intentionally or not. But she also knew, now, that he wasn't the man for her.

Serena took a deep breath. "I've known you for years, Cam, and I've respected you. You have worked hard to make the Open Skye everything it is today, and I know that you love the land as much as my father did. I know that if you were to gain control of the Double-S, you would work just as hard to keep it thriving."

That large tanned face was impassive, his square jaw tensed. "But...?"

"But..." She braced her shoulders. "But I know that I can't marry you." Green eyes flicked to Sebastian, standing silently beside her, and she resisted the urge to pull him closer. "You and I could marry and combine our ranches, but I don't think I'm the kind of wife you need, and I know that you're not the husband I want."

"Why not?" There wasn't any hurt in his voice. There was nothing in it.

"I want... I *don't* want to live on the ranch—any ranch—for the rest of my life. I've never liked it. It's so... *lonely*. I love Cheyenne, and all of my friends there. As much as I know that you are the right person for the Double-S, marrying you would mean that I'd have to live out there. And I don't want that."



“So you’re going to marry him?” Now she could hear the hurt in his voice. Not just hurt, but disdain, like Sebastian was beneath his notice.

Her chin went up, ready to defend the man that she loved. “As much as I lo—,” she stopped herself before uttering the word that would change everything. “*Admire* Sebastian, I know that he’s not the man for the Double-S either.” She took another deep breath, and turned to her beloved. “I’m sorry.” Her voiced cracked, and she had to swallow before she went on. “I can’t marry you, Sebastian. I think that you would be equally miserable stuck out on the Double-S as I would be, even if you *were* able to keep it thriving.”

He just looked at her. Just stood there, staring at her, and she saw the calculation and faint humor in those dark eyes. Finally, he spoke, amused. “Let me get this straight. You *want* to marry me, but you don’t want to give me your father’s ranch?” He shrugged. “Why not sell it?”

She had to look away, and sighed. “None of the adjoining landowners could afford it,” she knew Cam couldn’t, and Ash didn’t want it, “so I’ll have to advertise and offer it to someone with no experience running a ranch. I suppose I shouldn’t really care if he runs it into the ground, because I’ve never liked the place, but...” she bit her lip in consternation, “But I guess I didn’t want to admit defeat.” She sighed again.

“Sounds perfectly reasonable to me.” She could hear the grin in his voice, and snuck a peak at him. Sebastian didn’t *look* bothered. In fact, he looked like he was enjoying himself. He was facing Cam when he spoke. “She wants to marry me, but doesn’t think I’m good for the ranch. She thinks you’d be good, but doesn’t think you can afford it, right?”

Cam was still stoic when he nodded. “She’s right.” For a while—once she’d realized how incompatible they’d be—she wondered if the ranch was the only reason Cam had courted her. But he didn’t say anything else.

“If she offered the Double-S to you, here and now, how much could you give her?”

“None of your business.” Cam’s jaw hardened again.

“I’m *making* it my business.” Sebastian dropped her hand and took a step closer to Cam. She’d never seen anyone try to intimidate the big man, and she wasn’t sure that’s exactly what Sebastian was trying to do, but Cam’s brow shot up in surprise and—dare she hope?—grudging respect.

The two men stared at each other for a long moment, and she couldn’t even begin to guess what was passing between them. Then Cam broke eye contact, and started to pace towards the horses and

back again. It wasn't like he was anxious, the way she paced when she was worried, but more like he had something he had to think through. Sebastian glanced at her, and winked. He *winked*, like this was all great fun to him!

She didn't know if she should be relieved or miffed.

Then Cam stopped, fists on his hips, staring at the western sky that was only now turning blue as the sun chased the darkness away. After a long moment, he said "Ten thousand dollars. That's if I sold off a hunk of stock, and we cut back on feed for the winter, and relied on grass."

"Isn't that a dangerous gamble?"

"Well, less stock would mean less need for hay. Wyoming grass grows fine beef if the winter's mild enough."

"But you'd be gaining a lot more stock from the Double-S, wouldn't you?"

"Look," the bigger man glared at Sebastian, "you asked hypothetically, right? That's the best I could do." He glanced at Serena, "And I *know* the ranch is worth six times that."

"Well..." Sebastian stuck his hands in his pockets, and rocked back on his heels, grinning. He looked just like she imagined a schoolteacher would look, if he were about to explain something simple to dense students. "I don't know much about running a ranch," He shook his dark hair out of his eyes, and smiled widely. "But I *do* know a heck of a lot about investing."

Cam and Serena were both quiet for a moment, wondering if he was going to expand on that 'solution'. Finally, barely trusting herself to hope, she whispered "What?"

That grin again! "I don't know anything about cattle, but I know a lot about money. And I know a good investment when I see it. The Double-S is an established entity, and merging it with the Open Skye means it'd be a force to be reckoned with. You've told me about how you drive your cattle to the railroad to be shipped east, and Carderock Investments already holds stock in railroads and distribution centers. Seems to me it's about time we held one of the ranches too."

"I don't understand," said Cam, although Serena was beginning to, "You want to buy the Double-S from Serena?"

"No, I want to loan you the money to buy it from her." Cam looked stunned. "Not all of the money, of course. The rest will come from you. And I want to go over the books before we write up anything. But I think we can agree on a yearly percentage to return to me—or a mortgage, depending on the numbers we see—and the rest would go to you for your hard work."

Cam was still staring at him, dazed. "Why...?"

Sebastian shrugged, and looked away. "Because it's the only way

Serena will stop worrying and marry me. I love her too much to let something this minor come between us, not when I can fix it so easily. I have the money, and know how to invest it. I can be your silent partner, if it's easier to think of the arrangement that way."

Serena had gone faint at his casual declaration. She had to grab his arm to keep her knees from buckling, and he turned to her, worried. "Serena?"

"You mean it?"

"Of course. It's just money."

She smiled, and loved the way the worry melted from his face. "Not that. You said..." She held her breath. "You said that you loved me?"

Slowly, a perfect smile crept across her prince's face. "How could you doubt it? I thought I would go mad when you were missing, and that's when I knew that I loved you. But you had worked your way into my heart long before then, sweetheart."

She melted against him. "Oh, Sebastian..." It was the most romantic thing she'd ever heard, and she thought she was just going to turn into one big pile of goo when he lowered his lips to hers and kissed her.

Cam's throat clearing broke through their embrace, but Serena was too dazed to be embarrassed. Sebastian Carderock *loved* her! *Her!* She knew her grin went ear to ear.

Sebastian kept his arm around her when he turned to Cam. "So, what do you think? Want to go into business together?"

Cam's jaw was working, and finally he forced out a sigh. "I want Serena to be happy, and she's made it pretty clear I can't do that for her. You think you can?"

Sebastian smiled and dropped a kiss to her forehead. "I know I can."

"Then alright. If I can't have her, then the Double-S is the next best thing." She blushed now, but couldn't make herself look away. She knew that Cam would have never been happy with her—a wife who didn't want children yet, and couldn't cook or clean much of anything, and had Brixley buy all of their goods in town—but she knew that he'd be happy with the Double-S.

Cam stuck out his hand, and Sebastian shook it. They were covered in dried mud and caked in trail dust, and she saw the ease in which Sebastian moved through a world not his own. He was *making* it his own, and she was going to be there, beside him, helping him.

He dropped Cam's hand and gathered her in both his arms. "Well, darling? We have my new business partner's blessing. I'll go down on one knee again, if that's what you want." Her throat was too tight to answer. "Will you marry me, Serena Selkirk?"

“Oh!” She managed to choke out. “Oh, yes, Sebastian!” She threw her arms around his neck, and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. “Yes, I’ll marry you!”

He lowered his lips to hers, and she didn’t think she could be any happier.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



August, 1881

It was muggy enough inside the church that the ladies—the ones who weren't currently sniffing into handkerchiefs, at least—were all waving gaily-colored fans despite the doors being propped open to catch the breeze. Sebastian could feel a bead of sweat slowly inching its way down the small of his back, and he shifted impatiently. Reggie glanced at him sharply. Maybe he thought Sebastian was getting cold feet? The corners of his mouth turned up. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The last five weeks had seemed like forever. If he'd had his druthers, he would have carted Serena off to Reverend Davis on July fifth, and married her right after she agreed. But they'd all been dirty and sore from sleeping outside, and while he enjoyed having her bloomer-clad bottom perched on his lap for the whole ride home, she'd objected to being married in her unmentionables. So he and Cam brought her back to the Selkirk home, where the Barkers and Serena's aunts were frantic with worry. Cam went off to track down Ash and Nate to let them know that they could stop looking, while the ladies fawned over Serena and Sebastian. Agnes and Agatha both cried, and Pete looked disgusted anytime Sebastian stole a kiss from his bride-to-be.

He'd gone back to the hotel for a nap, and when he'd returned to pick her up for dinner he found himself discussing wedding plans with her aunts. The Barkers had gone home, and Cam had disappeared, and Sebastian spent a lovely evening with the three newest ladies in his life. He'd been quite content, until Agatha suggested a Christmas wedding. He had to put his foot down then, and tell her that he was okay with a big to-do, but it had to happen sooner rather than later. Agnes had huffed, asking about his rush.

Sebastian had grinned wickedly then, and drawing Serena into his arms for another kiss, told her aunts exactly why he couldn't wait too long to do all the things he'd been dreaming of to his wife. All three of them blushed fiercely, and he noticed Serena taking big gulps of air. He couldn't have been more pleased.

She loved him, alright. She'd told him so, several times since that morning out in the wilderness. But he'd known then, just by looking at her smile and the violet shine of her eyes. He'd been lucky enough to catch a woman—a lady—whom he admired and cared for, and who loved him in return.

Yeah, it had been a slow five weeks, but worth it. Serena and her aunts planned the grandest wedding he thought Cheyenne had ever seen... and his family had the time to be there with him. His younger brother Reggie had agreed to be his Best Man, since Bertie had stayed in New York to manage the business. Sebastian could tell that Reggie was intrigued enough with Cheyenne to consider staying a bit longer. There was no need to tell their mother that Reggie's interest was mainly in the gambling parlors and ladies of negotiable affection. She was having a hard enough time getting used to the idea of Sebastian settling all the way out here. To make her feel better, he told her that it wasn't necessarily permanent, and that if he or Serena ever got tired of "the frontier", they'd consider moving back to New York City.

His parents and his sister were seated in the front row, both the ladies wiping at tears. His father caught his gaze, and rolled his eyes enough to make Sebastian smile. Sebastian Carderock II was a shrewd businessman, but loved his family enough to put them first. He'd seen the same potential his son had seen in Cheyenne, and approved of his namesake's appraisal of the investments available to a wise man out here. He'd sat down with Sebastian and explained that while he'd miss having him in New York, helping to run the businesses, he approved of what he was trying to do here in Cheyenne. It had been an emotional and gratifying conversation.

Serena had been flustered at meeting his family, but had handled it well when she realized how personable they were. His mother, especially, tried to make her feel welcomed, and Sebastian appreciated that. Agnes and Agatha didn't seem to care *what* his family thought of them, but of course flirted outrageously with his father and Reggie. It had led to some raucously fun dinners.

The Barkers hadn't been left out of the planning, either. Sebastian had escorted Serena out to their 'spread'—as she called it—to discuss the wedding menu with Molly, and to ask Annie to be a part of their big day. The girl had practically swooned with joy, and the three females had cried all over each other. Serena assured him it was because they were so happy. But he'd seen the sadness there, too, and asked about it. She'd explained about her best friend Wendy, and how much they all missed her and wished she could be there. Sebastian offered her the comfort of his arms, and his kiss seemed to chase away any lingering melancholy. He'd left her there, happily discussing dresses and desserts, and rode over to the Open Skye.

Cam's ranch seemed small compared to the Double-S, but Sebastian soon realized that it was just the buildings he was seeing. Sure, the MacLeod properties were smaller and cruder than Serena's barns and outbuildings, but the land itself was expansive and well-taken-care of. Cam assured him that he had almost three-quarters the cattle that the larger ranch had.

He'd been leery of Sebastian when the younger man had first ridden up, as if he wasn't sure if their agreement still stood. But after introducing his father—a gruff old man with a permanent suspicious scowl—the three men sat down to discuss business. Sebastian spent some time looking over the Open Skye's books, and they all came to a satisfactory agreement. They'd all shaken on it, and Sebastian had some documents drawn up and sent out to the ranch for signatures. Now the Double-S was Cam's, and judging from the man's haggard appearance there in the front row beside Nate Barker, he was hard at work merging his properties and building them into a success. Sebastian wished him the best, and not just because he had money riding on the venture. Cam MacLeod had become his friend, and he respected the older man.

Cam caught him looking, and gave him a weary nod. Sebastian nodded back. He knew Cam had wanted to marry Serena, but he'd soon realize that things ended the way they were supposed to. Cam had really only wanted Serena's ranch... whereas Sebastian would move Heaven and Earth for the woman herself.

And then Mr. Kaminsky changed his tune, and a not-so-subtle wave of anticipation went through the audience. The main doors to the church opened, and Sebastian discovered that he couldn't think of anything else but *he was getting married!*

Annie came through the doors first, looking like she wanted to skip down the aisle in her fine pink dress and clutching a bunch of flowers from Agnes and Agatha's gardens. He gave her a special smile when she reached the altar to stand beside Reggie, but movement from the rear of the church drew his attention, and he forgot to breathe.

She was stunning. They'd found some kind of ivory fabric with silver sparkles, and worked up the most gorgeous wedding gown imaginable. It was low in the front, and gathered in the rear, and Sebastian could see that it trailed behind Serena elegantly. Her silver hair was free and soft down her back, with a few violet flowers worked through it. They matched her eyes, which sparkled with love.

The heat didn't seem to matter anymore. The violin music, the faint murmur of approval from their gathered family and friends, even his brother's quiet appreciative whistle... all faded. It was as if every fiber of his being was focused on the woman who was about to become his wife. He slowly exhaled, and knew beyond a shadow of a

doubt that this was *right*. The grin that crept across his face was soft and sure.

He was home.



Serena clutched Ash's arm for support, suddenly feeling faint. He glanced down at her, and patted her hand, tucked into his elbow. They started their stately walk down the aisle, and her knees were so weak that Serena felt like she was hanging off of Ash.

"You gonna be okay, missy?" His whisper was for her ears only.

Her mouth was too dry to respond, so she just nodded, and kept her eyes locked on Sebastian, who stood beaming at the altar.

Ash continued. "You know, Molly looked like that the day we got hitched." She tore her gaze away to glance up at her escort questioningly. "Like she was terrified and thrilled all at once." He smiled. "I *may* have talked her into marrying me a bit before she was ready, but I knew that we were gonna be happy together." Serena smiled slightly. Ash was right; he and Molly had built a beautiful life together.

"I just wanted you to know that, Serena." He squeezed her hand as he gently disengaged it from his arm, and she was a little surprised to realize that they were at the altar already. "Any fool can see that the two of you are meant to be. You'll be fine together. It's a sound match, and you'll be happy."

She'd always admired him, but in that moment she positively loved Ash Barker, for overcoming his rough awkwardness around her to make sure that she felt better. Even on her tiptoes, she couldn't reach him, so she tugged on his hands until he bent slightly, and she was able to plant a small kiss on his rough cheek. "Thank you."

He smiled, just slightly, and turned to place her hand in Sebastian's.

She caught her breath at the way her husband-to-be's gaze slowly took in all of her. His beautifully warm eyes rested on the teardrop pearl laying against her chest, and the corners of his mouth turned up slightly. The necklace had been his grandmother's and he'd gifted it to her the day before. She twined the fingers of the hand not clutching the bouquet through his, and he raised them to his lips.

"You are stunning, Miss Selkirk." She had to smile then, hearing the unseen grin in his voice. Very soon, she'd become Mrs. Sebastian Carderock, and she found that she couldn't wait. The knowing look in his eyes promised all sorts of new and interesting things to learn, being married to him, and she felt her cheeks heat at the intimation.

He leaned close to her ear. "What are you thinking about?" His



breath was warm on her cheek, and she felt her heart speed up.

She stared into his eyes, so close to her. "When I saw you for the first time, right here in this church, I thought you looked like a prince. I would have never guessed that someone as cultured and handsome as you could fall for someone like me."

"You mean someone as beautiful, kind, and giving as you?" He kissed her then, in front of their families and friends, in front of their wedding altar. Time seemed to stop, but she was intently aware of every passing second; the feel of his lips, the touch of his hand on her back, the sounds of Aunt Agnes and Aunt Agatha sniffing loudly behind her in the front row. It was exactly the way she'd always assumed a wedding kiss would go, and they weren't even in front of the preacher yet. She felt his lips curve under hers before he pulled away. "I love you, Serena. I'll never love another woman the way I love you."

"And I love you more than I thought possible, Sebastian." She watched his face light up with a brilliant smile, and marveled that she'd found such a stunning man. "I am looking forward to spending a lifetime loving you." She squeezed his fingers, and felt him squeeze back.

Turning then, to face the altar, she saw Reverend Davis beaming down at them, with Annie and Reggie on either side. Sebastian held out his arm, and she tucked her small hand into his elbow. He looked down at her and asked "Shall we get started, then?"

She smiled back, and they both stepped up to the altar, and into their new lives, together.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

### *On Historical Accuracy*



Cheyenne was just a few rows of tents in 1867, but by the time Sebastian arrived in 1881, it had grown into a bustling metropolis. It was one of the first cities in North America to have electric street lights, and modernized as fast as the cities Sebastian would have known back east. The Cheyenne Club, the Opera House, Millionaire's Row, Mearns's Saddle Shop, and the telephone exchange stood as examples of the city's progress. While the city never reached the size or population of Sebastian's New York, it grew to become the significant force in the American West that he imagined.

The themes of patriotism explored in this story are representative of the time; despite the movie portrayals of cowboys and westerners locked *only* in struggles with nature and each other, most citizens cared passionately about the future of their Territory. Garfield's shooting (he died from his wounds—or rather, infection caused by surgery on his wounds—three months later) and the holiday were convenient excuses to start the debate again. But Cam was right; Cheyenne needed all sorts of men to make it successful. Wyoming became the 44th state in the Union in 1890, thanks to the “citified” lawmakers and schoolteachers Cam had so disdained.

Luckily, women like Serena and her aunts weren't left out of the process. Wyoming was the first territory in the history of the nation to grant women the right to vote, all the way back in 1869. This was mainly because the population was so small that they desperately needed every vote they could get, but it had the added benefit of attracting marriageable women and young families to the territory. Women's suffrage was written into the state constitution in 1890.

This story's cast of characters is liberally sprinkled with real people: Mistery Hay, Carey and Whipple were three of the founding partners of the Stock Growers National Bank, but I used a bit of artistic license with their wives. Reverend Jerome Davis and Mrs. Davis built the First Congregational Church in 1869 after he served as a Lt. Colonel in the Civil War. He'd already been posted to Japan in 1881, but he was such an interesting character that I left him in Cheyenne to marry Serena and Sebastian.

And speaking of an “interesting character”, Barney Ford is

deserving of his own book. He escaped slavery in Virginia and traveled via the Underground Railroad to Chicago, where he married and chose the name "Ford", since he didn't have a last name prior to that. He and his wife traveled by ship to California (stopping for a few years in Nicaragua and opening a hotel) and then to Denver, Colorado where they opened the Inter-Ocean Hotel. They faced unbelievable discrimination and hardships that cost them several of their businesses, but Barney persevered, eventually opening a hotel by the same name in Cheyenne. At one point, Barney was the 14th richest man in Colorado, and was the first African-American nominated to the Territorial Legislature. He was instrumental in assuring the Colorado constitution allowed black voting rights.

Finally, I'd be remiss if I left out a short discussion about Annie's schooling, since that's what brought Sebastian to Cheyenne in the first place. Oralism was the dominant movement in deaf education at the time. It was based on using lip reading, mimicking the mouth shapes and breathing techniques of speech, and speech itself to teach deaf children. Oralists like Alexander Graham Bell argued that manualism (using sign language) indicated lower intelligence, and often forbid students/teachers from using sign. Manualists argued that forcing deaf students to learn how to form words (essentially learning a new language, when 'language' itself was a new concept) meant that they couldn't concentrate on the meaning of those words, and thus they weren't learning as much. Today, deaf education accepts both of these methods as valid, although some people still only use one or the other. And while Sebastian's method of education wouldn't be commonly termed "inclusive" for 120 years, students with disabilities were being taught alongside their peers well before the creation of Schools for the Deaf.



If you've enjoyed the history behind *A Cheyenne Celebration*, I urge you to find me on [Facebook](#) or follow me on [Twitter](#), where I frequently post fascinating pieces of social history that I find while researching. Do you like reading historical westerns, and like hanging out with others who do too? Join us on the [Pioneer Hearts](#) Facebook page, where we have the most wonderful discussions, contests, and updates about new books!

I have some exciting new books planned, and I'm always on the lookout for great stuff to giveaway to my subscribers. If you'd like to keep up with my stories, or read deleted scenes, or receive exclusive free books, sign up for my [newsletter](#).

For all of you who were rooting for Cam; don't worry! He'll find his own little firecracker to teach him all about love in *A Cheyenne Thanksgiving*. Now that he's realized he's ready for a family, he's not going to let anything stand in his way! Keep reading for an exclusive sneak peek.

Reviews help other readers find books they'll love!

All feedback is greatly appreciated.



From *A Cheyenne Thanksgiving*

August, 1882

They were planning something horrible.

Tess was packing up the leftovers from dinner when she heard the men she'd been traveling with—men she'd known and trusted for months—planning to do her the deepest harm. They were around the far campfire, and didn't see her on this side of the wagon. They'd been drinking as well, and probably didn't realize how loudly they were speaking. Or that she could hear their plans.

"Whatdya mean 'hold her down'?"

"She's jest a tiny little thing. Ain't gunna be too hard." Tess couldn't hear well enough to know who was speaking. She stood still in shock, straining to hear more, but dreading it.

"All I'm saying," that was one of Willis' favorite phrases, so it had to be the foreman speaking, "is that she's a fighter."

"You think so?" That was Crowley, the new hand. She'd only met him four weeks before, and didn't know him as well as the others, but wouldn't have thought he'd be the type to press his attentions on a woman.

"Yeah, she's a spitfire alright. It ain't gunna be easy."

"What about you, kid?"

"No secret I want her." Stanley was two years younger than her, and Tess had known he was sweet on her. But she never would have thought he'd do something so... so brutal. So terrible. She should have been terrified, but found herself listening with a detached horrified fascination. She was numb, listening to them discuss how

they were going to go about raping her. The sack of leftover biscuits hung unheeded from her hands, and she barely heard Jacob singing to himself as he poked holes in the dirt with his favorite stick. All she could do was stand, frozen, and listen with a kind of morbid curiosity, as if they were speaking about the weather.

Stanley's voice again, and the sound of liquid in bottle. "What about the boy? She'd shut up fast enough if she thought he was in trouble."

"I figure we hit him real hard, and he'd stay out of our way."

"Nah, he's the key to getting her to cooperate."

"All I'm saying is, she'll lie real still if she thinks the kid's..."

Tess wasn't sure if Willis had stopped talking, or if the blood pounding in her ears just drowned him out. Jacob! The sudden fear dragged her gaze towards her son. But he was fine, still oblivious of the threat, happy as only a two-year-old in dirt could be. Still, hearing the men discuss how to 'handle' him had snapped her out of her daze.

Her heart was beating so fast that she was sure she would throw up, and she had to force herself to take deeper breaths. She couldn't focus on the anger or fear... she had to hear what they were planning. She had to find a way to outwit them.

"How's about we jest wait 'til the boy's asleep? Hell, wait 'til she's asleep too, then just grab her? Tell her we'll hurt him good if she don't lie real still?"

"Yeah, I like that. Pass the whiskey." They quieted, and Tess squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, the world looked the same, but she knew it wasn't. She couldn't un-hear what they'd said, and had to do something to ensure they could never, *ever* hurt Jacob.

Slowly, deliberately, she finished tying up the biscuits, and then methodically wrapped up the remainder of the fowl in the oilskin. She'd planned to fry both of them up for breakfast tomorrow, but now wasn't sure she'd be able. Would she still be the cattle drive's cook in the morning? Or would what they planned to do to her mean she wouldn't be able to function? Would she still be alive, come the morning?

She glanced at Jacob again, and winced. He couldn't afford for her to give up. For his sake, she had to find a way to fight these men. She wasn't going to let them hurt him to get to her.

How had she misjudged them so badly? She'd known Willis for almost six months, since he had started coming to the store whenever he was in town. He'd always been friendly and trustworthy. When he found out her trouble, he had offered her a spot on the next drive south, and she didn't have to deliberate long. Why, even Mrs. Patullie had vouched for him! She was sure she would be safe with him. And Stanley had brought her flowers *twice*. She'd thought he was sweet!

But cursing her own poor judgment wasn't going to save her now. She had to decide what to do. The men had quieted now, but she could still hear the clink of the whiskey bottle and the occasional bursts of laughter. Had they been serious? Were they really planning on raping her, on threatening her baby to get what they wanted from her? Or had it just been idle pratter, fueled by boredom and liquor?

She couldn't take the risk of being wrong. She had to treat the threat as a real one, and get her son to safety. But how? They were four days from Fort Fetterman and the dubious civilization it offered, and another week to Cheyenne. The men had waited until they were in the middle of nowhere before voicing their plans. Whether it had been deliberate or not, their isolation worked to their advantage just the same. She hadn't seen a ranch or homestead in the last three days, and there was no one to whom she could turn for help.

Her .32 was in the wagon, but hadn't been fired in months. She knew it was loaded, and knew how to use it, but didn't much like it. Joshua had insisted she know how to take care of herself, and it had been a useful threat several times since his death, when men had tried to accost her. But she'd always been in a town then, with the trappings of civilization around her. She had a strong feeling that just waving the weapon at the three men wouldn't work this time. They'd likely laugh at her, and take it from her. Worse, once she introduced guns into the situation, one was more likely to go off... and she just couldn't risk that with Jacob so close.

No, she was going to have to outwit them. And without any sort of resources, anything—or anyone—she could threaten them with, her only hope lay in escape. She had to run, to leave the dubious safety of the cook wagon and the fires, and hope for the best. They'd come after her, but maybe they wouldn't catch her. And even if they did, maybe they would have lost their violent bent as the whiskey wore off.

She had one hope: Fort Laramie. She'd studied the maps before they'd left, and knew that it should be due east of their location, based on how far they'd come since Fetterman. The drive was headed south, to the depot in Cheyenne, and if she were to head towards Laramie, the men probably wouldn't bother to come after her. Driving several hundred head of cattle four days out of the way to pick up a stray cook and her son would be foolish. If she could get away from the drive, and the men, she had a chance to make it to Fort Laramie. She'd be safe there; but more importantly, so would Jacob. Willis, Crowley and Stanley couldn't hurt him to hurt her.

Tess was never one to dally. Once she had a plan, she acted. The biscuits and the wrapped meat fit easily into a cloth sack, with enough room for a few essentials. She packed quickly, one eye on

Jacob and her ears pricked for further hints from the far campfire. Inside the wagon she lingered briefly over her trunk, knowing the loss of all of the clothing and personal items would cost her dearly. But she was nothing if not practical, and knew that everything inside could be replaced with time and money. She could make money, if she had time. And the only way to buy time was to leave the trunk. Still, she took her mother's silk scarf and her father's intricately carved opium pipe, because she couldn't bear to leave them behind.

Hanging the sack over one shoulder, and a canteen over the other, she shrugged into her carrying sling. Now that Jacob was steady enough to walk on his own, she rarely had to carry him. But since joining this drive, she'd occasionally taken him for a stroll in the evening, to rock him to sleep. She hoped that if Willis saw her this evening, that's what he'd assume she was doing.

Jacob must be sleepy already; he'd rubbed his eyes at some point, and smeared dirt down one cheek. He didn't protest when she scooped him up and handed him his favorite blankie. As he nestled his head into the hollow of her shoulder, she hoped that he didn't understand what the beating of her heart meant.

He was used to the sling, and slid easily into the pouch of material, straddling her stomach and popping one dirty thumb into his mouth. She winced, but was glad that he was quiet. Ready now, she slipped the Smith and Wesson into the back of the sling, and shifted in various directions to make sure it wouldn't come loose... or worse, blow her backside off.

Taking a deep breath, Tess set off in a vaguely northerly direction, humming softly to Jacob. As she passed the second campfire—confident that Jacob's bulk hid the bags of provisions—she saw Crowley glance at her and then nudge Willis. The foreman probably didn't realize how loud his voice was when he said "Good, we'll let her put the kid to sleep first..."

Swallowing past a suddenly dry throat, Tess forced herself to keep her gait steady and calm, when all she really wanted to do was clutch her baby and run. But her act must have worked, because the men didn't say anything else about her.

She turned eastward as soon as she couldn't hear the men's laughter anymore, and gave the cattle a wide berth. Last thing she needed was to accidentally step on something important and start up a commotion... or stampede. Once away from the fire she kept the vague glow of sunset at her back until the stars were clear enough to guide her. *Baba* used to take her away from the city to show her the pictures the stars made, and she knew how to find the one in the north that didn't move. She used to love the stories of Zhuque, the Vermilion bird of the South and Baihu, the White Tiger of the West,

and occupied her mind by telling them to Jacob as he fell asleep against her chest. Once he was sleeping, though, she didn't have anything to distract her from the desperate situation she'd somehow landed in. Tess wrapped her arms around his bottom for better support, kept the North Star on her left shoulder, and walked.

And walked...and walked.

She was strong and there was enough moonlight for her to see where she was going. Still, she managed to stumble on hidden hollows and burrows several times, despite the way the plains seemed to stretch out before her. Soon enough, the small of her back started to ache from carrying Jacob in front of her, and she regretted not slinging him across her back. She took more and more of his weight on her arms instead, and soon was exhausted. Her feet, even in their sturdy boots, began to ache, and then burn, and then faded to a dull ache once more.

She walked for hours, surely long enough for Willis and the others to have noticed her missing. What did they do when they realized she wasn't coming back? Were they riding after her right now? She'd surely left a clear trail, but there was nothing she could do about that. She somehow forced herself to walk faster.

It was probably only an hour before dawn when she stepped in a hole—an animal's den, probably—and fell. She just couldn't make herself get up again. Clutching Jacob to her, she slept, utterly spent.

The two-year-old started to squirm after dawn, and she untangled him from the sling just in time to help him unbutton his trousers. He was hungry, of course, but so was she; they each ate and drank a little before she sat him in the sling across her back—her shoulders and hips would carry most of his weight, rather than her aching back—and they set off again towards the rising sun. Tess hadn't had enough sleep, but she couldn't stop. The Laramie River was somewhere over *there*, and they had to reach it.

And so she walked, and walked.

Jacob wanted to get down to walk too, and when she wouldn't let him—she couldn't afford the delay—he threw a fit that lasted most of the morning. He didn't understand the danger they were in, and she didn't want to try to explain. She worried that his screams would travel back the way they came, and point Willis in their direction, but she couldn't make him hush. The only time she let him down was to eat or relieve himself, and he eventually tired himself out. She joined him for a brief nap when the sun was high in the sky, but he was awake before she felt refreshed. It was a bad idea to keep sleeping after he woke; Lord knows what kind of trouble an unsupervised, curious two-year-old could get into. She fed him again and set off.

Tess was hungry, but couldn't afford to eat much. The stolen



food would have to last them both until they reached Fort Laramie, and she estimated at *least* another day of walking. Would she be able to last that long? She would have to. More than the constant pain in her feet and legs, it was the heat that bothered her. She'd been born in temperate San Francisco, and spent the last years in Montana Territory. The heat of a Wyoming August was fierce. Her mother's scarf helped tie her hair out of her face, but nothing could be done about the way her shirt stuck to her skin or the cotton skirt seemed to tangle around her knees. She was losing too much liquid from sweat, and had to rely on finding streams to refill her canteen. Soon, she occupied her mind with prayers to find water.

That journey was the most grueling ordeal she had ever encountered, and it was made worse by Jacob. She was constantly terrified for him, and what would happen to him if she stopped and Willis and the other cowboys caught up. Or if she failed, collapsed and died out here, dooming him as well. His safety—his survival, now—relied on her decisions, and that was frightening. And he was just too young to understand *why* he couldn't run around, or why he couldn't eat more.

They walked most of the second night, too, and into the next day. The hours blurred together into a haze of dull terror and pain. The way Jacob's eyes started to grow listless terrified her, and she let him drink the rest of their water. She walked and walked, always eastward, seeing nothing but grass.

On the second evening, Jacob fell asleep early, and she allowed herself to sink gratefully into a doze. But it was just a nap for him, and the moon wasn't up too far in the sky before he woke, propelling her mechanically to her feet once more. They walked through the night.

Her son chattered himself to sleep again sometime well after midnight, but she forced herself to keep walking. She felt like a monster from one of *Baba's* stories; cursed to follow a command—walk east!—like a clockwork person. All she *wanted* to do was drink, sleep, and eat... in that order.

Thank goodness dawn had come by the time she stumbled on the riverbank; otherwise she surely would have tumbled in and drowned in the sluggish flow. As it was, it took all of her energy to refill the canteen, drink greedily, and refill again. One need sated, at least, she loosened Jacob in the sling, and lay down beside him, using the material to shade them both from the sun.

Right before she fell asleep, she prayed that they'd found the Laramie River. Because she couldn't take any more of this.



Don't worry! You can read how Cam rides to Tess's rescue in [A  
\*Cheyenne Thanksgiving\*](#), available now.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Lee is what George R.R. Martin once described as a "gardener author"; she delights in creating interesting and lovable characters, and allowing them to lead their own stories. Often they draw the story along to completely unexpected--and wonderful!--places. She considers a story a success if she can re-read it and sigh dreamily... and she wishes the same for you.

A love of historical romance prompted Caroline to pursue her degrees in social history; her Master's Degree is in Comparative World History, which is the study of themes across history (for instance, 'domestication of animals throughout the world,' or 'childhood through history'). Her theme? You guessed it: Marriage throughout world history. Her favorite focus was periods of history that brought two disparate peoples together to marry, like marriage in the Levant during the Kingdom of Jerusalem, or marriage between convicts in colonial New South Wales. She hopes that she's able to bring this love of history-- and this history of love-- to her novellas.

Caroline is living her own little Happily Ever After with her husband and sons in Virginia.

*Other works by Caroline Lee*

### **The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet**

*A Cheyenne Christmas*

*A Cheyenne Celebration*

*A Cheyenne Thanksgiving*

*A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming*

*Where They Belong: A Sweet Cheyenne Christmas Novella*

*The Mothers of Sweet Cheyenne: A short story collection*

### **Everland Ever After**

*Little Red (Rojita + Hank)*

*Ella (Ella + Ian)*

*Beauty (Arabella + Vincenzo)*

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